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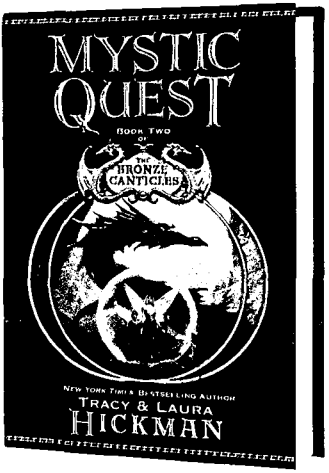

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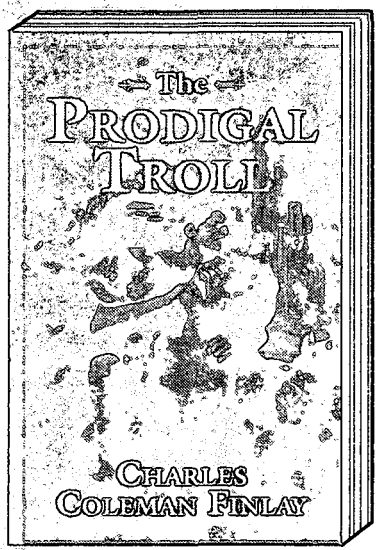

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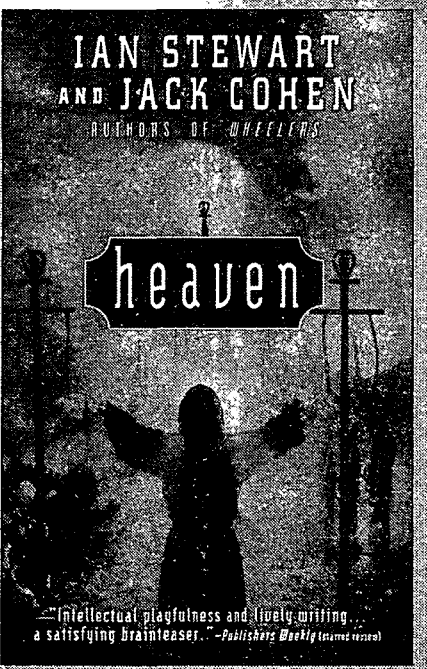
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Fans of Charlie Finlay's stories about Maggot, the human boy raised by trolls, will be pleased to know that his novel The Prodigal Troll *is due out around the time this issue hits the stands. Here we bring you a new story in a different series—it's another tale featuring those adventurers Kuikin and Vertir, last seen in pursuit of the gaud chrysalis in our June 2004 issue. This time out, however, they're the pursued and not the pursuers...*

Of Silence and the Man at Arms

By Charles Coleman Finlay

THE IMP, SKIN PUKE-GREEN in the dusty tavern light, tiny hand tugging at the silver chain around its throat, shifted position on the bounty man's shoulder and sniffed the air with its porcine nose.

Vertir was less interested in the imp than in the bounty man. Stopping his search for his friend Kuikin, Vertir pushed his way through the crowd of soldiers, mercenaries, cutpurses, and cutthroats until he came close enough to hear the man's voice.

" — two of them," the bounty man was saying, even those simple words rich with the accent of Desmeé. Vertir knew that sound because he and Kuikin had recently fled Desmeé. "There's a reward for the capture of either man, or both."

"And how will I recognize them?" the barkeep asked.

The bounty man unrolled a scroll with two black ink portraits stamped from wood block carvings. Vertir squeezed between the shoulders of two much larger men and craned his neck to see it. The imp leaned toward him, staring straight into his eyes, wrinkling its nose, until

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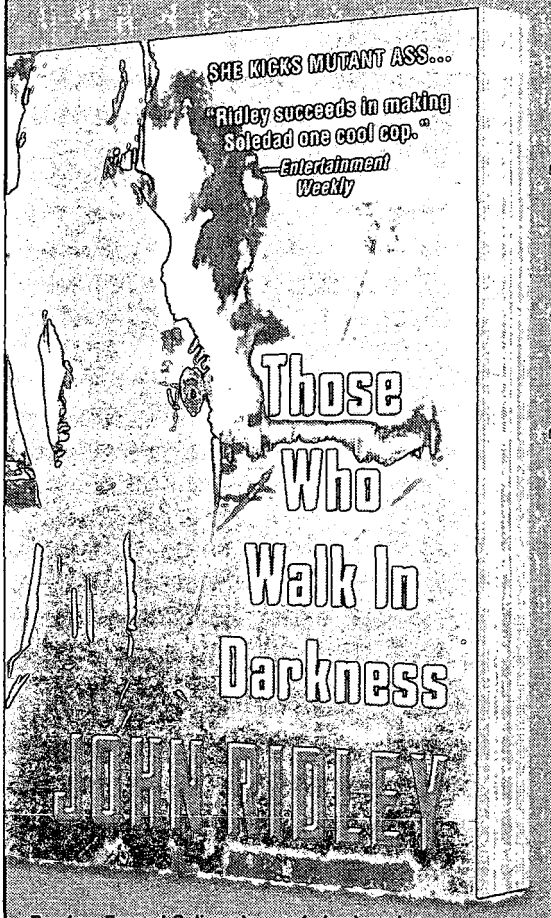
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another man pressed between them. Vertir turned away as soon as its gaze was broken.

"This doesn't help much," the barkeep said. "I see men that look like this in here every day. I have today."

"Their average appearance makes them such successful spies and assassins — " the bounty man replied.

Vertir had to admit he had that much right.

" — but although both men are of ordinary height and features, the darker-haired one is from Shin," pronouncing it Chun the way folks in Desmeé did, "and can be recognized by his accent and martial bearing. He's been a mercenary in several countries. The fatter one may try to pass himself off as a scribe. He trained as a scribe. It's also certain he has mastered some dark sorcery."

Ha! Kuikin could only wish he had even the smallest skill for sorcery. Aloud, Vertir said "Yes, I know you're sorry you're a clumsy oaf" as he shoved a drunk aside to get him off his foot. "Hey," slurred the drunk, staggering around. But he backed away from the murderous look in Vertir's eye. Or — Vertir stole a glance over his shoulder — more likely to escape the baleful yellow-eyed glare of the imp.

" — the fatter one is a coward, refuses to carry weapons, and isn't as dangerous," the bounty man was saying. Getting two of three things right. "But he's very clever, does all the talking. The other one is only the muscle, throws the bodies around."

Vertir spat on the floor at that, saw it hit someone's boot. He looked up — and then up some more — to find a scar-faced boulder of a man with an axe in his belt. Only a mother could love that face, and then only if she were half-blind. The scar was recent, but had been tended skillfully — it was the sort of thing a man like Vertir, who'd seen an overstock of wounds, couldn't help but notice.

"My apologies, comrade," he said. "That wasn't directed at you."

The boulder spat back. "Ain't your comrade."

"Sorry, friend, I must've mistaken you for some other," he couldn't say *stump-ugly son of a toad*, "fellow I know." As he backed away, the barkeep's voice boomed — "By the prayers of the sunburnt saints, that's a lavish reward."

"Yes, they murdered the archsorcerer of the Bey."

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"They were the ones what done it?"

Unfortunately, thought Vertir as he edged farther away, they were the ones what done it. The archsorcerer had tried to prevent them from stealing their true objective, the Bey's magic aegis. He searched quickly for a rear egress, although rear was only a vaguely relative term. The tavern had started out as a stall between two buildings where men could drink the thick local alcohol from small cups and watch the passersby in the fountain square. Eventually, it had been roofed over with canvas to shade the men from the desert sun, and later the canopies stretched back into a maze of buildings that opened out on the alleys behind the square. But there was no proper entrance, and men came and went from numerous directions, including in and out of windows, where women and womanly boys hidden behind sheer veils leaned on sills enticing them with poetic descriptions of delightful perversities.

There were two heavy thumps as the barkeep climbed onto his counter. Vertir paused to listen. "Unplug your ears, you greedy pack of mongrels, and peel the skin off your grapes to get a good stare at this picture until these two faces are stamped on your memory like two heads on a gold coin." He held up the block print, but Vertir was too far away to see it clearly. "And yes, I do mean gold. First man to turn in either one of these assassins wins a sack of the Bey's best mint — and has to buy a round for everyone in the bar!"

That brought laughter and a cheer. The imp emitted a shrill screech at the noise, prickling the skin on the back of Vertir's neck. He saw daylight around the corner of a building, an exit into some back alley, and headed for it.

A fist closed on his collar and yanked him to a stop. Vertir spun, twisting his arm around the other man's wrist and breaking his grip.

"You ain't no comrade of mine," the scar-faced man said, squinting through his disfigured eye.

"I said I wasn't," Vertir replied, noting two vulnerable spots where he could kill the man with a blow, and six more ways to disable him. He held up his hands peacefully and backed away.

Screee, screee, screee went the imp, with various patrons clamoring for it to quiet so they could hear the announcement they'd missed the first time.

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Vertir spotted an exit past the last tables, smelled the stench from the alley, and was pushing toward it when a hand grasped his forearm and tugged him around again.

"You sound like you're from Shin," said the big scar-faced boulder. Clearly this was a bulldog fellow who couldn't let go of an idea once he had it by the throat. "Look like it too."

"And you look like you're going to pick Cerebus's teeth if you touch me again," Vertir replied, mimicking a Pyune accent and jabbing an elbow into the man's gut as he pulled free.

"Alive or dead!" the bounty man shouted in answer to a question behind him. "Either way!"

Tucking his chin to his chest, Vertir darted for the thin shaft of light and the stinking breeze. When a hand reached out of the shadow and clutched at his shoulder, he reacted without thought, driving his fist at the other man's head and pulling his punch only at the last second when he heard a familiar "Hey — "

Too late. Knuckles connected to bone, snapping the other man's head back and dropping him to the dirt floor. Even before he knelt at the man's side, he could see, by the spray of blood and wrong shape of the face, that the jaw was broken. "I was just looking for you, Kuikin."

His friend clutched at his head and moaned.

With a last glimpse back at the imp, Vertir picked up a stray tooth and tucked it into Kuikin's pocket, then scuffed the blood into the dirt. Grabbing a fistful of tunic, he jerked his partner to his feet and shoved him out into the alley.

"Is it a young girl you'll be wanting me for?"

As she asked this question, the midwife appraised him like a merchant finding a soft coin. She must have been tall once, but the weight of the world had bent her shoulders to Vertir's height. Her tiny shop opened out onto a small garden. So many bundles of herbs hung drying from the ceiling that he had to duck around them.

"It's my friend," he said. "Barroom fight, broken jaw."

"Ah, by the look of you, I thought it'd be a young girl needing to lose a baby." She waited for a reply, as if he might yet change his story. "If it was one of the jing-jing girls, they'd have come to me directly. So it might

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be someone's daughter, in which case you'd be better off leaving town or getting ready to settle down."

"The only daughter on my mind is my own," Vertir said. "And I'll gut any man who touches her."

"Daughter, huh?" The midwife turned away from him, taking hollow reeds and a long wire out of her bag. "How old is she?"

"Fifteen years, in the month of floods and blossoms." He never talked about his family with Kuikin, because he was superstitious about it drawing bad fortune on their enterprises, but he couldn't help mentioning them to strangers. "She favors her mother, praise the gods."

The old woman chuckled, grabbing extra rolls of bandages from a shelf. "So how long ago did your friend's accident happen?"

"Since the saint called his prayers from the stele in the square. Not long." A few hours. "But he seems delirious." Or possibly still drunk. "I need him healthy enough to travel."

"It's bound to get worse before it gets better, no matter what I do." She led him out of the tiny room, through the crowded garden, to a door in the mudbrick wall, on which she pounded. "Tobias!"

"What're you doing?"

"Escort." She stared Vertir in the eye. One of her lids drooped and fluttered. "You don't like it, your friend doesn't get any treatment."

Vertir briefly weighed whether that might not be the better option. He had not gone to a barber-surgeon, who would almost certainly have seen the bounty man's poster, for precisely the reason of secrecy. But midwives in soldiers' quarters were famously discreet. Their soldier-escorts were not.

She rapped again. "Tobe! Up, sluggard!"

No reply came to her call, and, with a deep unhappy frown, she stopped to study Vertir again like a merchant who's discovered the coin isn't soft, only very worn. After a long pause, she said, "Well, let's go look him over then."

Vertir led the way. They passed quickly through the fountain square. The saint's stele rose in the middle by the fountain, casting its long shadow across the buildings; the holy man paced atop it, watching the merchants gathering to form a caravan below. The midwife raised her hand in greeting to one of the caravan men before Vertir could dodge into the alleys, away from prying eyes and a different escort. Namascus had

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grown up around the only water supply in a long stretch of desert between the Beyant of Desmeé and the suzerain of Verspoli. The whole city would be no more than a village elsewhere, with only eight crowded blocks, one large public square, and an uneasy peace among the merchant lords who found it convenient to reside there. They turned onto a long row of tenements lining an alley no wider than two donkeys. Called Short Street, it ran uninterrupted for seven of the city's eight blocks. Vertir began to whistle a tune at the corner.

"My love waits a long way away, away.
Where the wind leads the mountains astray, astray.
And the river flows faster
The harder I row.
I won't see her again in the blooming,
But I'll hold her again 'fore the snow."

He counted off paces as he sang, pausing on the last note in front of a drab building, three stories of mud indistinguishable from the others around it.

"Have you seen snow?" the old woman asked, surprising Vertir, who'd been thinking of his wife and had expected a question about her or his daughter.

"So deep a man who sank in it could never swim his way back up to the surface. I wouldn't mind a little right now."

She tilted her head up at the sun stabbing down into the narrow alley and chuckled again. It was a knowing chuckle, the kind that came wrapped around a secret, and he didn't care for it.

Bypassing the front and side doors, he led her through a tight passage to the rear of the building. "We'll have to go up here."

He pointed to wooden posts no wider than a foot, projecting from the wall. They looked almost like supports for an unfinished addition, lopped off for lack of room. Vertir ascended them like steps or rungs from a broken ladder — he'd had to carry Kuikin over his shoulder to get him up there. At the top, he stepped over a gutter and into a small garret window not visible from below nor accessible from inside the building. He leaned on the broad sill of the window. "Do you need any help?"

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"No," she said, "I," bracing herself against the house next door, which was close enough to touch, "do," then taking another step up, "not."

"Didn't think so." He stepped out of her way as she climbed through the window. "Here he is."

Kuikin was propped up against the wall, on the straw mattress in the one corner of the room. His face was swollen and blue, but he turned at the sound of them. So he was conscious.

"Mmm," she said, squinting at him. "Mmm."

"Mmm!" Kuikin said, lifting his arms to Vertir as if to ask a question. "Mmm!"

Vertir regarded them both. "I see you two speak the same language."

Leaving her bag on the floor, she took Kuikin's head in her hands and examined it like a piece of suspect fruit. Kuikin's red, puffy eyes searched Vertir's for an explanation. "Here's one problem," she said, gripping his forehead with one hand and his swollen chin with the other. "The jaw's dislocated."

It snapped into place with an audible click of bone — Kuikin moaned and stomped his foot on the floor.

Vertir grimaced, but she'd been worth fetching just for that. "I think he'd have preferred a warning."

"What? So he could stop me?" She retrieved swaths of stained but freshly washed cloth from her bag and began wrapping them tightly around Kuikin's head to hold his jaw immobile. "Sit still, you little baby. The swelling'll go down in a week, maybe a bit more — stop fidgeting! You, watch how I do this."

"Yes," Vertir said, barely omitting the "Ma'am."

"He'll need to keep his skull wrapped this way for a moon, maybe two. Otherwise it won't heal right and every time he cracks a nut on his back teeth, his jaw'll come unhinged again."

"Mmm!" Kuikin protested.

"And he should stick to liquids too, for a while."

"It's liquid that brought him to this pass," Vertir said.

"And he'll be wanting a bit more of that to ease his pain for the next few days," she said, pulling a wineskin from her bag. "This'll do that and keep his strength up."

"Mmm, mmm!" Kuikin said enthusiastically, taking the wineskin from her hands, and giving her a wink and a pat on the rump.

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She slapped his hand. Hard. "You haven't had enough to drink to get away with that yet."

Vertir didn't drink at all, and would have preferred Kuikin not drink either. "That should do it then, eh?"

At the sound of his Shinnish accent, which he'd forgotten to suppress, she squinted again, studying both their faces closely as if to memorize them. "Yes."

They dickered over her price, and Vertir accused her of putting the hag in haggle, but they came to an agreement and he helped her out the window again. When he turned back, Kuikin was uncorking the wineskin. Vertir snatched it away from him. "You need to stay clear-headed for a moment, Kuke. The Bey of Desmeé has sent his soldiers after us with a blood imp."

"Mmm mmm!" Kuikin said. It sounded a bit like "*I know!*" He clutched for the wineskin again, and Vertir caught his hand.

Kuikin's fingernails were all bitten short, except for the one shaved down to the soft skin. The Bey's soldiers had shaved the end off when they entered his city, just enough of Kuikin for the imp to track him down. A fate Vertir had escaped by wearing false nails taken from a dead man. The imp wouldn't catch him.

If they still had the aegis, they'd be safe from the bounty man and maybe even the imp. But they served as spies for the Notary-General of Implements and Roads, who, in turn, served the imperial Dynast, and they had already sent the aegis on to the Notary-General by way of courier. Vertir came from northern Shin and Kuikin had grown up in the distant Ankee River district, which made both of them hard to trace back to the empire, especially at a crossroads like Namascus.

It also meant they were cut off from assistance. Their instructions were to make contact with one of the Notary-General's agents, find passage with a caravan, and return eventually and indirectly to the empire. But only Kuikin was trusted to know who their emergency contact was supposed to be. Only Kuikin knew the code words that would get the Notary-General's agent to turn money over to them. Kuikin, the scribe. Kuikin, the drunk.

"Kuikin, we have to escape before the imp finds us."

"Mmm mmm!" It sounded a lot like "*Finds me!*" The problem was

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that once a blood imp had your scent, nothing but death could stop it from finding you.

Kuikin wrestled the skin away from Vertir, and took a long, noisy swallow though his swollen lips. Wine trickled from the corner of his mouth, staining the bandage red. He leaned his head back and lifted his arm to cover his eyes.

VERTIR TOOK the jewel-hilted scimitar from the display stand in front of the broker's counter and swung it, once, twice.

All Kuikin knew about their contact was he was the proprietor of a pawnshop, which seemed simple enough before they arrived. But pawnshops in Namascus were as common as men desperate to get somewhere else. Vertir had spent a day seeking all of them out and finally settled on one just off the main square because it had a notary's proclamation pasted to the wall by the door. The proclamation was decades old, a Dynast ago, and perhaps several proprietors past. But it was a place to start.

Besides, this store, Vertir noted gleefully, specialized in weapons. There were trident-knives from Zhitong, calvary sabers from Gomul, and even some hooked pikes bearing the faded emblazon of the mercenary troops of Elee — he inhaled sharply, drawing in a breath almost twenty years old. He'd served as a runner for the old man before the company's surrender and the disbandment, and he'd have known the hands that held those pikes. What had happened to those men, and how had the pikes come to be here — ?

"What do you think of the blade?" the broker interrupted.

Vertir swung the scimitar around, slashed it at the broker, who stared down his beaked nose and didn't flinch. "Too heavy in the hilt. Someone repaired it at some time who didn't understand the importance of balance."

"I'll sell it to you for ten silver Desmeés."

"And if I only have Dynasts?"

"You have Dynasts, this far from the empire?"

"Minted by the Notary-General."

That was the code, more or less, as well as Vertir could painstakingly

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ascertain from Kuikin's awful scrawl, at least his part of it. The two men stared at each other, neither giving anything away or learning anything new. "You don't want that scimitar," the broker said at last. "It has poorer balance than my uncle, whose left foot was bitten by a bed-asp and had to be cut off. It shames me to have it in my shop."

Vertir replaced it on the rack. Maybe he'd found the right spot. "I am sorry that my curiosity has called up unhappy memories of your beloved relative."

"Perhaps I can inter — "

The chimes that hung in the open doorway rang. A barefoot urchin boy stood there, all but breathless. "Soldiers! Searching the street!"

He held out his hand for a coin. When neither man reached for his purse, the boy ran. They heard him at the next door.

Vertir walked over to the doorway to see for himself, and almost bumped into the bounty man. The bounty man stood a head taller than Vertir, but was thin and narrow, long-faced and large-eyed like a greyhound. Mail showed at the throat of his cloak, and his arms were tattooed with wards against sorcerous attacks. The imp sat on his shoulder, gnawing at its chain. Jaundiced spittle trickled down the silver links. The bounty man stopped in mid-step to stare at Vertir, no doubt comparing his face to the one on the poster.

"Nice pet you have there," Vertir said in his best Pyunish accent.

"Search all the rooms," the bounty man said, jabbing his finger at the counter and shoving his way inside, and six soldiers leapt at his command. Vertir would bet they were from the Bey's personal guard. The bounty man turned back to Vertir. "Are you mocking me?"

"Naw, sure and I'm not. Is it a monkey? I heard of monkeys, from the coast of Cafrique, but I never seen one."

"The bartender," interrupted one of the soldiers, "has a monkey. The one at the sign of the — "

"Quiet," said the bounty man. Then to Vertir, "Have you never seen an ensorceled imp?"

"An imp?" Wrinkling his nose, he leaned forward to stare at the creature, which lunged at him, bared its sharp teeth and went "*Shreee! Shreee!*"

He jerked away. "No, I never seen an imp. It looks sore hungry — don't you feed it?"

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"Oh, we'll feed it all right," the bounty man said. One of the soldiers sniggered.

"What do you feed it? Salads? Greens? Monk's food?"

"*Shreeeee!*" The imp shoved the chain into its mouth and slobbered over it.

The bounty man allowed himself a tight and evil smile. "We feed it a piece of a wanted man — a lock of hair, a fingernail, a drop of blood. It cannot rest again until it finds that man."

"And then you give it honeyed biscuits or something?"

"Depends on what the fugitive had for his last meal," said the sniggering soldier.

Vertir put on his best dumb face. "What do you mean by that?"

The bounty man reached into a pouch at his waist and pulled forth a fig, which he held in front of the imp's face. It squealed at him and opened its mouth to snap at it. "You see those front teeth?"

"They look sharp enough."

"They'll gut a man in seconds, tear every piece of flesh from his bones in a morning. You see those back teeth?" He dangled the fig over the imp's head, so that it stretched out, gaping wide. "They're harder than millstones. Once he catches the criminal we've set him on, he'll grind even the bones to dust."

Vertir whistled, and in his best hick Pyunish drawl, said, "You don't say."

"An ensorceled imp can't abide the least bit of a man left in existence once he's been set on him," he said, plainly bored with Vertir now. "He won't leave a scrap to be mourned, not a chip of bone to be prayed over."

There were bumps from the back room, and an inarticulate voice from upstairs, and finally a chorus of answers, all of which amounted to much noise about nothing. But turning to answer them, the bounty man saw the jewel-hilted scimitar at the counter, and stepped over to admire it. He stuffed the fig back into his pouch, leaving the imp hopping from one shoulder to the other.

The broker, looking like a man who'd passed too much in bribes for no reason at all except these were soldiers and bribes were expected, said "Why don't you try it, honored sir?"

The bounty man took a few swings while the imp scrambled onto the

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top of his head and chattered, and the soldiers joked with each other and explained how there was a hidden room inside the wall beneath the steps. "If you like the scimitar, I will sell it, nay I will let you steal it from me, for the mere price of twenty silver Desmeés," the broker said. "It belonged to my beloved uncle, and I hesitate to part with it at all, because it is such an heirloom."

"It has very poor balance, too heavy in the hilt," the bounty man said, tossing it on the floor. He pulled the poster from his side, and unrolled it, holding it up first for the shopkeeper's benefit, and then for Vertir's. "We are searching for these men."

"They're awfully ugly," Vertir said. He supposed they might resemble himself and Kuikin in a scowling, low-browed way — about as much as a monkey resembled an imp.

"Have you seen them?"

"No, I haven't. But I'm sure they'll come after me in my nightmares tonight."

"And you?" he asked of the pawnbroker.

"I haven't seen them either, good sir."

"If you do, come find me." He named a tavern, while the soldiers gathered around him. "There is a substantial reward for either one or both of them."

"I thought you had the imp to find them," Vertir said.

The bounty man gave him a hard look. He flicked his eyes to either side, and two of the soldiers pinned Vertir's arms behind his back. "Hey, what are you doing? I — "

In the split second while Vertir was noticing the right hand man's vulnerability to a quick foot sweep and turning his hip in case he wanted to throw the man to his left, the imp was flung at him. The creature landed with a screech on his shoulder, tiny taloned feet and paws poking through his clothes, as its wet nose snuffled at his throat, as its foul breath mixed with his own when the beast shoved its snout into his mouth, and tugged at his hair. But it was looking for the dead man whose nails Vertir had been wearing, and not him, and after a few loathsome seconds of this interrogation by scent, it leapt back onto the bounty man's arms and scrambled up to its usual perch.

"Come," he grumbled to his men. "On to the next building."

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The soldiers shoved Vertir away with a rough laugh, and departed, rattling the bell seven times as they each passed beneath it. Vertir watched them go, forcing his heart to slow and his fists to unclench before turning to the broker. "So, you were saying to me — "

"Get out. Leave." He was trembling. The imp had unnerved him. "My shop is closed for the rest of this afternoon. I have nothing here to help you."

Vertir bent and picked up the sword and handed it back to the man. "Give my regards to your uncle. Either one of them."

THE SUN was setting when he returned to their garret. He had visited most of the pawnbrokers in the city, and still thought the first one was most likely their contact. There was no way they could leave Namascus without some funds, if only to buy provisions, so he'd have to go back and try again tomorrow.

As he turned onto Short Street, he assured himself that the soldiers with the bounty man were likely to check it last. It would be the hardest job, not just because it contained the most buildings in the smallest area, but also because it promised the most opposition from its residents, who, having so little to lose, would hazard it all on a mix of whim and anger; Vertir knew from firsthand experience that, given the chance, most soldiers would put off the hardest job for last.

He hummed his way past the men leaning shirtless out of windows, dodging a pair of urchins kicking a dusty bladder, until he arrived at their building and turned down the narrow walkway — only to find the path blocked.

His hand was palming his knife before he recognized the man and decided he could still play it either way.

"So you decided we were comrades after all?"

The big boulder of a man turned his scarred face toward Vertir. "Huh?"

Incredibly, his eyes were duller sober than they were when he was drunk. Dull as they were, they held more boredom than threat. It didn't mean there was no danger, though, especially if he was merely the lookout and extra muscle for smarter colleagues.

"Step aside, if you don't mind," Vertir said. "I'm here to check on a friend."

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"Ah, good enough," he mumbled, pressing up against the wall. "I'm waiting to meet someone."

"If I see them, I'll send them down for you."

"Sure."

Vertir squeezed by, inhaling to get past the hard rock of this man and around the corner, and then running up the odd stairs to their garret space. He paused silently on the window ledge and saw what he'd feared — a shadowy figure leaned over Kuikin with a hand clutching his throat. With his knife still in his hand, Vertir stepped silently to the floor. Two steps and he could — "Good, good," said a familiar voice. "The swelling has already abated."

The midwife.

Vertir slipped his weapon back into its sheath, gave a little cough, and hopped, making a thump on the floor as if he'd just jumped in the window. "Hello."

She started and turned. "What?"

"So he's doing better, eh?"

Distracted, she stepped past him, leaned out the window, and shouted. "Tobe?"

"Yes, Maw?"

Maw? Vertir could see the resemblance. And wished he couldn't.

"Just checking to be sure you're there." She looked at Vertir, shook her head. "You think he would have said something when you approached."

"Oh, I asked him not to. We're old friends."

"Are you now?"

There was an expectation in her voice that threw him. "Not really. But we did meet once before in the tavern over beside the fountain square."

"Hm, he spends too much of his days there."

With a nod toward Kuikin, Vertir said, "So how's the jaw?"

"Oh, better. Knew it would be. He'll have to mash up his food for the next few weeks. Paste and meal, and plenty to drink. But he'll be fine."

"Mmm!" Kuikin agreed, holding a fresh wineskin.

"Not if he keeps drinking," Vertir said.

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"Listen, I also came to see you."

"Yes?" Vertir said, fearing a warning. She had recognized them after all.

"Look, I know Tobias isn't so bright — "

That was like saying that a moonless, cloudy night was just a little bit darker than noon.

" — but he's strong as a galley bull and he's a good-hearted boy, and as gentle as the dew on grass when he's not drinking. I thought we might — "

"Yes?"

"Well, I thought we might introduce him to your daughter."

"I don't know what to say," Vertir choked out. Besides *hell no* or something else equally likely to upset her.

"Mmm-mmm-mmm-mmm!" Kuikin said, sounding like he was laughing; then, clutching his head in pain, "Mmm-mmm!"

On the other hand, this might be their way out of the city. "You know we're not from Namascus."

She laughed ruefully. "No one is from Namascus excepting urchins and a few like Tobe. We all get stranded here on the way to somewhere else. Even the merchants keep their families east, down along the sea-coast. Tobe served for a while in the bodyguard of one of the merchants, and I thought that was going to be his way out."

"Mmm, mmm mmm?" asked Kuikin, inching forward on the edge of his bed.

"Yes — what happened" Vertir interpreted.

"Something misfortunate," the old woman admitted. "But it wasn't Tobe's fault, though it did put him out of work. It gave him that scar though, and many a young girl would be impressed by that. If he could marry a good girl, settle down somewhere where he could work with cattle or livestock — as long as he has work to do, he stays out of trouble. But ever since the misfortune, no one will hire him."

"The trouble is, we're not going anywhere. Right now we don't even have a way out of town across the desert."

Her eyes lit up, the half-lidded one twitching again. "Tyruk the merchant is forming a caravan to Verspoli. From there it's only a short way to the sea and you can sail north for Shin."

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From Verspoli they could also go to the Dynast's consul and arrange for transportation home — he could see his wife and children again. "I'm sorry," he said, frowning. "But we don't have money to pay for passage with the caravan."

Her hand clutched at his forearm. "But the caravan master hires the guards! He knows Toby. He's the one man who knows it wasn't Toby's fault. And he owes me a favor or two."

Hopes of her offering them some secret stash of coins seemed too much to dream of anyway. This was almost as good. The imp would still come after them, but he liked their chances against the Bey's men in the desert. And if they made it all the way to Verspoli, they could beg help from a sorcerer.

There was a soft "Mmm?" and Kuikin raised an eyebrow. Vertir pretended not to notice.

"Toby's a good boy," he said. "Well-meaning. And strong. I bet he would be good with livestock." Assuming that the livestock didn't outsmart him.

"He's very faithful, my Toby," she said.

"I can make no promises about — "

"No, I understand." Her voice trembled. "These things take their own course with young people. But there are opportunities in Shin for a strong young man."

Opportunities to freeze to death in the sudden blizzards, be attacked by venomous tuskrats in the mountains, or end up as pike fodder in the border wars. There were reasons Vertir had left Shin and ended up serving the Dynast. "Lots of opportunities," he said, nodding.

"You won't regret this. Hey, Tobe!"

"Yes, Maw?"

She grinned at Vertir for a second, wiping sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. "And when he's settled down, he can send for me and I can see snow." Then, leaning out the window, "I've got good news for you, darling, wonderful news. You've just got to do one thing — "

"Mmm?" Kuikin asked again, insistently.

Vertir looked at him and shrugged. If this all depended on Tobe to do one thing right, it might still not happen.

* * *

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A motley of camels, people, and donkey wagons loaded with casks of water and bags of goods were gathered in the fountain square. The fountain was no fountain at all, merely a flat pool of warm brackish water that was filled from some deep spring. The saint cast down his bucket from the top of his stele, which was a large flat-topped marble column on which he lived and prayed to the sun at noon each day in exchange for offerings from the townspeople. The small tin bucket hit the water with a splash that made Kuikin jump nervously at Vertir's side.

Of course, Kuikin had been nervous ever since they dressed him up that morning like a freesword. The helmet on top of his head must have been stiflingly hot, but it covered his features excepting his ill-favored scowls. He refused to carry any weapons, but they convinced him to let an empty scabbard hang out the bottom of his cloak so at least it appeared that he was armed.

The caravan master, a man so darkened by the sun that he looked cooked, glanced from Tobe to Kuikin to Vertir, and said, "I don't need anyone, especially foreigners, especially a runt."

Tobe said, "I used to work as a guard for — "

"Yes, I know, and I know that his assassination wasn't your fault. That and the fact that I owe your mother two favors are the only reason we're having this conversation — "

Camels brayed, spit, and scattered. The saint laughed at them overhead. A herder was driving a flock of a dozen dog-sized scorpions, tapping their sides and tails with his ten-foot staff to keep them together. "Hie! Hie!"

"Get those away from my carts!" yelled the caravan master, but too late. One of the donkeys spooked, tipping a nearly overloaded cart and spilling several bags. When the young boy who was the driver calmed the animal, the caravan master said, "Don't just stand there."

Tobe started tossing the bags into the back.

"Not so hard!"

Vertir went over to help. The bag he lifted was split at one corner — figs. He palmed a few, and popped one in his mouth while the caravan master finished yelling at the scorpion herder.

"I'll take two of you, but that's all," he said, when he came back. "We're not carrying that much extra water." He stared at Vertir, who

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stopped chewing a moment too late, then back at Tobe. "I'll take you and the fat one there. He's so ugly, I won't have to worry about keeping him away from the wives."

Vertir wanted to laugh at that, but Kuikin did look impressively fearsome. Hung over, scowling, shoulders hunched menacingly, his hands fists — and that was all before you noticed his bruised and swollen face.

"But I need to take them both," Tobe said, jerking his thumb at Vertir. "Well, I need him."

"I have other skills," Vertir offered. "I can scout against bandits."

The caravan master snorted. "If I were crossing northern mountains, I'd take a thief from Shin — "

"Pyune," Vertir corrected, but the other man only snorted again.

" — but for the desert, I've got Banisadai scouts I can trust already."

Tobe pleaded now. "But I'm supposed to meet his daughter!"

With a shrug of dismissal, the caravan master said, "Then let him pay for his way from her dowry. Two of you, for the two favors I owe your mother. That's my best offe — hold on! What now?"

He was already spinning to deal with a new commotion up the line, not the scorpion herder this time but the bounty man with his handful of soldiers. The imp was screaming on his shoulder, tugging him back along the line.

They'd have to make a quick escape and find some other way out of the city. Vertir turned to grab his friend while there was still time to escape but Tobe was arguing with Kuikin, who was in as foul a mood as Vertir had ever seen him. Which was saying something, because he was one moody, difficult — "You have to stay behind!" Tobe insisted, and he grabbed Kuikin's collar to emphasize his point.

"Mmmm mmmm mmmm mmmm!" Kuikin swore back — it sounded like swearing even though it was unintelligible — and twisted Tobe's wrist, unsuccessfully, to try to break his grip.

"*Shree!*" screamed the imp nearby.

"Hey, Kuikin," Vertir said, seizing his partner by the shoulder, but Kuikin, frowning, knocked his hand away and went back to cursing at Tobe, who was now trying to shake him into agreement.

"I know the one we seek is here," the bounty man told the caravan

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master over the imp's shrill cries. "If you just delay setting out until we can search the caravan — "

"If I delay any further, we won't make it to first camp by nightfall," the caravan master complained. His Banisadai guards, in their salt-white robes, surrounded the bounty man's soldiers, as if eager to clash with the tall, soft city men of Desmeé.

The bounty man shoved through them, as men parted out of the way of his frantic, foul-smelling imp. It looked to be all mouth now, gaunt with hunger and gaping their direction.

Too late to run. And if they caught Kuikin, they'd trace a way back to him. Vertir clenched his fist, lightly out of reflex, and felt the figs mash — which gave him an idea. With Tobe and Kuikin still gripping each other tightly, staggering back and forth, he thrust two fingers down into Kuikin's vest pocket. When they hit something hard, he said a silent prayer of thanks to several gods he didn't believe in.

"Tell 'im!" Tobe said. "Tell 'im you and me're comrades and he has to stay behind!"

"Mmm!"

"If you gentlemen will excuse me," Vertir said, leaping to intercept the bounty man. The imp hopped frantically on his master's shoulder, tugging at the collar of his mail.

"Hey, I might've seen those two fellows," Vertir said.

The bounty man stepped one way, then the other, as agitated as the imp tugging on the mail at his throat, but Vertir stayed in front of him, mashing the fig around the item he'd retrieved from Kuikin's pocket.

"Out of my path!"

"But your monkey looks famished," Vertir said, and he jammed the fig into the imp's open mouth. It swallowed it in one gulp. The talons scratched the back of his arm as the bounty man simultaneously slapped his hand away.

" — I said you ain't goin'!" Tobe screamed, and he swung his fist at Kuikin, who stumbled trying to get out of the way and grabbed Tobe to keep from falling. Tobe tripped over his leg and slammed into the bounty man. The imp leapt from his shoulder as they both fell to the ground, with only Kuikin left standing.

The imp circled, desperately trying to get untangled from its silver chain.

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Vertir waited a second — when nothing happened, he gripped a panting Kuikin by the shoulder. "I had a plan, but it didn't work. The new plan is we run for our lives, hide somewhere in town until dark, then take our chances in the desert."

A stunned nod, as Kuikin saw the imp up close for the first time. Keeping his body between Kuikin and the rolling, fighting mass of Tobe and the bounty man, Vertir headed up the line toward the city. The caravan master was walking back in their direction, slapping the rumps of the pack animals, shouting at his drivers to get moving. His guards still surrounded the bounty man's soldiers and held them back. Seeing Kuikin and Vertir coming, he said, "So it's the two of you then, is it? You accept the terms — food and water, do anything I tell you?"

"Sure," Vertir said, since they were already moving that direction. His eyes were on the alleys just past the square.

The caravan master fell in beside them. "Had a feeling Tobe wouldn't want to make the trip, way he's attached to his mother, may the saints pray her soul. And," clapping Kuikin on the shoulder, "I liked the way you handled two men much bigger than you. Don't think I wasn't watching. So go on up to the middle wagons and look for — what in the holy name?"

He stopped and tugged their sleeves, pointing. Vertir paused, pulled Kuikin around to see. With mewling pealing to a howl, the imp clawed curiously at its own stomach. Even as they watched, its foretalon drew a line across its belly — skin split, blossoming pus and crimson. The imp scooped out the first handful of its own bowels and started sorting through them. The bounty man shoved Tobe away and fell on his knees, clutching his head in dismay.

"By the pillars of the adversary," murmured the caravan master.

"Mmm?" Kuikin asked, eyes wide in confused and uncomprehending panic.

"It was your tooth," Vertir said, wrapping his arm through Kuikin's and tugging him up toward the middle of the caravan. "The imp bit off more than he could swallow."

The sun stood directly overhead, and the saint atop his stele threw out his arms to the sun and shouted out his blessing on all travelers. The jumbled line of beasts and wagons lurched into motion and passed out the

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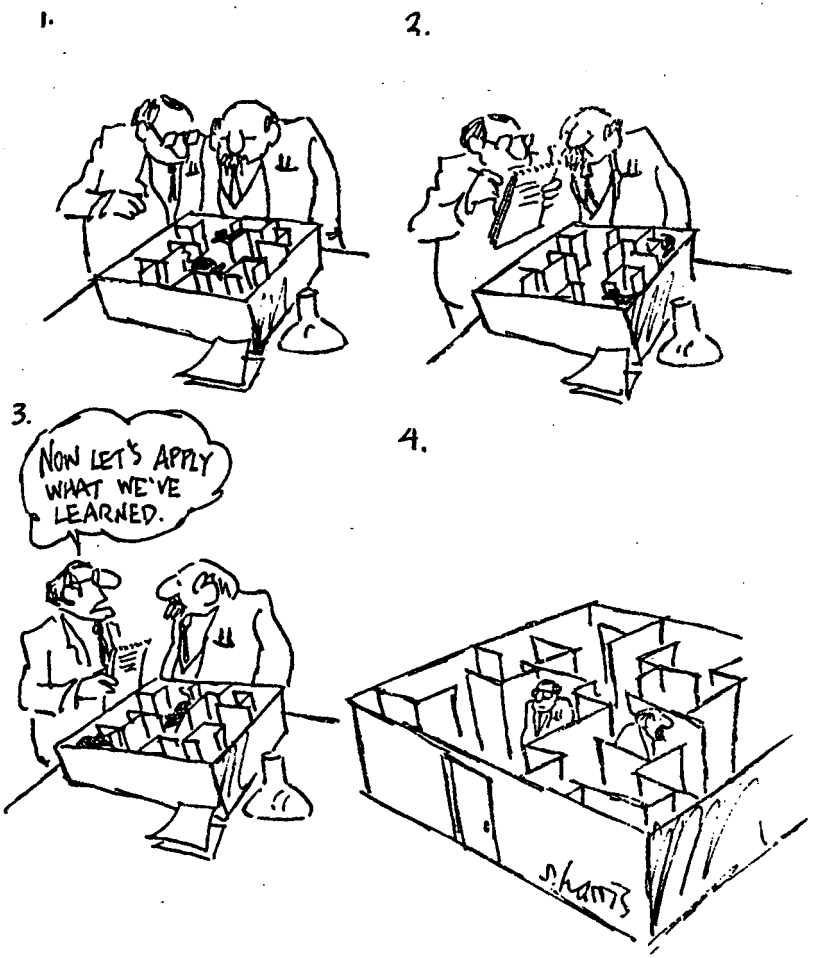
city gates. Just outside the walls, Kuikin started to tremble, until he shook so badly he staggered as he walked. But when Vertir reached out to steady him, he thrust the help aside, and forced himself onward.

"Mmm mmm."

"My thoughts exactly," Vertir said as the prayers of the saint chased them out into the sands.



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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Creatures of the Night, by Neil Gaiman & Michael Zulli, Dark Horse Books, 2004, $12.95.

COINCIDENTally, no sooner had I turned in last month's column (in which I was extolling the virtues of Michael Zulli's art and urging you to seek it out where you could), than I received a copy of *Creatures of the Night*, a new collection of two Gaiman stories illustrated in graphic format by Zulli. And what a fine job he's done of them.

You won't find any slick superheroes dashing through a big city or outer space here. Instead, the settings are rural, one contemporary, one a few centuries in the past. The art has a real painterly quality — if I may use that term for something rendered in pencil, ink, and what appear to be watercolors. What I mean is that Zulli has gone for an emotive approach. He doesn't forgo proper anatomy and perspective or anything like that, but one can see the ink marks and watercolor washes in each panel, and they add a richness to the texture of the art, rather than distracting from it.

The two stories he illustrates also appeared on *Speaking in Tongues*, the CD discussed last column. If I hadn't heard those stories in their full "prose" versions already, I would probably have felt happier about Gaiman's adaptation of them to this graphic format. But I did, and as they appear in *Creatures of the Night*, they have only the charm of Zulli's art going for them. Because of my familiarity with the full versions, Gaiman's captions here read more like an outline.

Ah, but the art is gorgeous. Look at it while you listen to the stories on the CD.

Hanging Out with the Dream King, by Joseph McCabe, Fantagraphics Books, 2004, $17.95.

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And speaking of Gaiman, I have here in hand another book related to him.

Hanging Out with the Dream King is for Gaiman enthusiasts only. It's a collection of interviews with his various collaborators, and while you rarely find such a diverse group of talented artists and writers brought together between the covers of one book (the aforementioned Zulli shares space with everyone from Charles Vess to Mike Dringenberg, Terry Pratchett to Gene Wolfe, Tori Amos to Alice Cooper), the sharp focus on their collaborations with Gaiman starts to feel a little claustrophobic after a while.

I was reminded of that "Parrot News" Monty Python sketch in which every news item was presented in its relevance to parrots. (You know, along the lines of: "A terrible car crash in East London this morning; no parrots were injured.")

The author certainly explores elements of each interviewee's personal strengths, and it becomes obvious that Gaiman is a delight to work with, and is someone who challenges his collaborators to stretch their creative wings. But the focus on these collaborations — twenty-seven in all, running for almost three hundred pages — gets tiresome. I kept wishing that McCabe would give us a little more on the individuals he was interviewing, but of course that's not the point of this book.

As it stands, anyone with an abiding love for Gaiman's fiction — be it in a prose or comic book format — will find *Hanging Out with the Dream King* a real treasure trove of information and trivia. But I doubt the book will win either Gaiman, or his collaborators, any new fans.

Life Expectancy, by Dean Koontz, Bantam, 2004, $27.

It was a bumper year for Dean Koontz readers, with four new books published, two of them full-length novels.

The most recent novel, *Life Expectancy*, has Koontz doing what he does best: telling a harrowing, highly suspenseful story featuring quick-witted protagonists who face the world with a positive attitude and exchange rapid-fire dialogue reminiscent of old films such as *His Girl Friday*. Oh, and the books usually have one major plot element — ranging from slightly to far outside of the norm — that can't be explained.

In the case of *Life Expectancy*,

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it's a prophecy made by Jimmy Tock's grandfather on his death bed. Before dying at the exact moment that Jimmy was born, in the same hospital, his grandfather comes out of a stroke-induced coma long enough to predict not only the exact details of Jimmy's birth (time born, weight, sex, a particular birth defect, etc.), but also provides the dates of five terrible days to come in his grandson's life.

Considering the accuracy of the first part of his predictions, Jimmy and his family take the rest seriously and face the approach of the first crucial day with as much planning and care as they can muster, but to no avail. The events of that day prove to be more surprising and terrible than any of them could have imagined. Over the years, each subsequent dangerous day builds on the trials of the ones before, taking the reader on a roller coaster ride full of startling twists and turns, and sometimes into such strange places that the track doesn't even seem to exist anymore.

Life Expectancy is both a dark and a joyous book, a novel that, once you start, you won't be able to put down until you're done.

The Taking, by Dean Koontz, Charnel House, 2004, $225.

Regular readers of this column will know that I often espouse ebooks. Many readers are uncomfortable with what they feel aren't "real books," by which they mean ebooks lack the tactile experience that they see as part of the pleasure of reading. But I maintain that it's the words which are important — it doesn't matter how they come to us — and have friendly arguments with those friends of mine who disagree.

But the point I've probably never made is that I, too, love the tactile experience of reading a physical text. Just because I appreciate the convenience of ebooks doesn't mean I'd ever want to give up physical volumes completely, especially not when they include such lovingly crafted books as the Charnel House edition of *The Taking*.

I should mention that *The Taking* is also available in an edition from Bantam at the more reasonable price of $27. But I don't think that the Charnel House edition is overpriced, not when it's produced in a slipcased edition of 300 copies, bound in silk, each page a pleasure to the fingertips. Mind you, I couldn't possibly afford this sort of book myself and was lucky to have a copy given to me. I only mention all of this because it reminded me once again of how beautiful a book

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can be as a physical object, and to let those of you who are more flush know that gorgeous editions of books by some of your favorite authors are being produced under the general publishing radar. You just need to look out for them.

As for story itself...I gave a quick rundown above of what one can usually find in a Koontz novel. Now by doing so, I didn't mean to imply that he writes to any sort of a formula beyond wanting to entertain (and at times edify) his readers. The mix of humor and suspense at which Koontz excels is not at all an easy thing to pull off — one wrong move and the suspense dissolves into farce — but he seems to do so effortlessly, and the plots never go the way you might expect them to.

That said, *The Taking* is also a reminder that one should never attempt to pigeonhole an author.

I suppose every writer has an end-of-the-world novel in them (even if it's only that period of fatigue two-thirds to three-quarters of the way through the writing when one often seems to hit a creative wall and just wants to type "And they all died. The end."). This is certainly Koontz's.

It begins with torrential downpours throughout the world, drowning deserts and mountainsides alike, then focuses in on a couple living in the small California mountain town of Black Lake. The events in Black Lake unfold like a microcosm of what is affecting the entire world as its inhabitants have to deal with flooding, strange fungal growths, and stranger creatures coming out at them from the darkness caused by a failed electrical grid and the heavy cloud cover that blocks most of the sun.

I realize the above sounds a bit like Koontz has stepped into a Cthulhu Mythos pastiche, but while some elements seem to hint at a Lovecraftian origin, we soon realize that he has given us something that's more along the lines of a traditional Western Armageddon, as can be found in the Book of Revelation, then filtered through the dark glasses of his imagination.

There's not much humor to be found herein. From the mood of shock as the book opens, through the mounting despair as things worsen, this is a dark and fascinating novel. It's not without hope — but hope certainly takes a beating — and it's full of spirit, both the human spirit with its desire to protect and prevail, and a greater spirit that we can't necessarily explain, but informs the lives of so many of us.

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I'd rank this right near the top of Koontz's best novels. In fact, I'd rank it as one of the best novels, period.

Life Is Good! Lessons in Joyful Living, by Trixie Koontz, Yorkville Press, 2004, $17.95.

Turns out Dean Koontz isn't the only writer in his family, as his golden retriever has just had her first book published. I mention it here not only to alert Koontz enthusiasts of its existence ("Dad," Trixie tells us, edited the book), but because it's a grand little picture book that's fun to read. And all royalties from its sale go to Canine Companions for Independence, the national organization that breeds and trains service dogs for adults and children with disabilities.

Trixie, herself, is a retired canine companion.

I had a thought as I was writing the above, that if we were to play the game of assigning animal types to people, then Koontz, as a writer, could be portrayed as a dog: he writes so often of faith, love, and loyalty, as well as espousing a fierce protective spirit to help those who can't safeguard themselves.

All good things. Just like dogs.

Robot Santa, by Dean Koontz, HarperCollins, 2004, $19.99.

The last of Koontz's 2004 titles is a collaboration with artist Phil Parks, a sequel to their earlier book *Santa's Twin*, and continues the misadventures of Santa's brother, Bob. The art is a real treat, bright and vibrant; the story light-hearted and fun and written in doggerel verse (a description which would probably make Trixie smile).

Oh, and just to be clear, by doggerel, I'm going with the first definition you'll find in the dictionary: "comic or burlesque, and usually loose or irregular in measure." Koontz's verses are certainly humorous, but they scan well — especially when read aloud.

Which is what you should do with this book: read it aloud to your favorite child.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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MUSING ON BOOKS

MICHELLE WEST

Metallic Love, by Tanith Lee, Bantam Spectra, 2005, $6.99.

Old Man's War, by John Scalzi, Tor Books, 2005, $23.95.

Bad Magic, by Stephan Zielinski, Tor Books, 2004, $23.95.

BOOKS, FOR me, are like physical places. They occupy the space in my mind that in others are occupied by cities, or great cathedrals, or vast, flat plains that extend in green for as far as the eye can see in all directions. There are some books that are like a Wal-Mart, and some, like a Swiss Chalet — but there are some that are like a secret garden, a hidden place, hallowed by words and the ghost of the first reactions they invoked.

The Silver Metal Lover, possibly my favorite of Tanith Lee's many, many novels, was first published in 1981. I have a copy of the edition I first read, with its faded yellow spine, its odd depiction of a silver man, its densely packed type and yellowed pages. If books are a type of geography, the terrain of this particular novel has always been — since I first emerged from its pages, weeping — a familiar one that never fails to move me.

And any attempt to return there that *isn't* shuffling the same pages, stopping over the same phrases, is always fraught with both a joyful anticipation and a keen sense of dread, because as a reader, I've seen many landscapes scarred or altered by things that were done there later. But curiosity being what it is, I took the risk and opened the pages of a different novel, remembering the dismantled Silver and his lost young Jane.

If you haven't read *The Silver Metal Lover*, you should. If you can't, it's not entirely necessary — because Loren, the young orphan raised by religious fanatics in Lee's second novel of a future in which

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robotics can capture perfection, *has*. Left to the orphanage by a mother of ill-repute, she has none of the advantages of Lee's previous heroine, and her life among the poor and the disadvantaged has produced a girl without the startling naiveté and insecurity of Jane.

But disadvantaged, street-smart, world-weary Loren and cozened, controlled, and spoiled Jane have several things in common: they're adolescents, they're isolated, and they believe in love. Loren learned about love when she read Jane's book. Jane learned about love when she met Silver, one of the first generation of too-perfect robots. Loren has always dreamed of meeting Silver.

META corporation, for reasons known only to its owner, has decided to try again. Although the first models of the early robots were recalled and destroyed, technology has advanced, and META, realizing its first mistake, has made certain that its second generation won't suffer the same fate. *These* robots can't be better than humans because they simply can't be compared to them; they're faster, stronger, more gloriously beautiful; they can change shape, literally changing into dragons, among other things. They've been programmed to please.

And of course they need to be beta-tested.

Loren knows this; she sees Silver in a commercial in a house she's cleaning, and she *knows* who he is. She manages to make her way, blindly, to where he will first be publicly displayed — in a performance that makes clear how very little robots and humans have in common.

But *this* Silver — this isn't Jane's Silver. He's called Verlis. He *has* all the same memories that Silver had; he *looks* the same; META wanted to give him these things because something about Silver *was* different, and they want to know what it was.

Loren doesn't want to know, at least not at first; there's a bitter disbelief in her first encounter with the robot, a crushing loss of belief in the hope of love, that only the young can know. But there's also the attraction, the overriding desire, the being *in* love, that only the young can know so entirely, and as she learns the truth about Verlis, she remembers that not all angels are found in heaven.

This is a darker book than *Silver Metal Lover*, in part because Jane was so painfully vulnerable, so entirely honest, in ways that Loren can't be, and in part because Silver

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isn't Silver either; reborn and renamed, what he retains and what he rejects are entwined: If Loren is smarter than Jane in the ways of the world, Verlis is less wise, more mercurial, and vastly less comprehensible.

It's hard to say more without giving away important parts of the plot, and this, too, is different; the plot and its twists matter more. But if this book is entirely different, it's certainly not a failure, and reading it doesn't destroy what was there before; it is not a kind book, but it's not without power and even hope.

John Scalzi is familiar in a different way. I've never read his fiction, but on the internet, I always read "The Whatever," a blog of longstanding in which Scalzi airs his somewhat direct opinions, some of which clash with mine, and many of which don't. He has a very down-to-earth sense of humor, an endearing hubris, an adorable daughter, and a way with words that is almost entirely without poetry, and never without both humor and truth.

Reading *Old Man's War* presents, therefore, far less risk than Tanith Lee's novel to this reader. Reading his fiction takes nothing away from reading his opinion pieces, and if I'm not moved or amused by it, I lose nothing. From a vantage of having nothing to lose, *Old Man's War* was more than a pleasant surprise.

John Perry is a seventy-five-year-old man, living on the quarantined planet of Earth. Widowed for almost a decade, he's about to fulfill a promise and join the foreign legion. Well, okay, not exactly the foreign legion — ten years ago, both he and his wife signed up for the CDF, the Colonial Defense Forces who protect Earth's fledgling colonies from the depredations of aliens that obviously never watched *Star Trek*. Perry and his wife aren't exactly warmongers; they signed up for practical reasons: only the CDF has the technology necessary to rejuvenate the elderly. They wanted to be young again, and there was only one way to do it: serve ten years in the CDF.

There's no way home; you sign your papers, and you promise never to return to Earth again. When your time of service is up, you can relocate to one of the colonies, but the planet of your birth is strictly forbidden you. Without his wife, Perry doesn't feel that much attachment to home, and he embarks on the path of the warrior. More or less.

There's much about this book

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that's familiar; it's a very old-fashioned sf novel, of a sort I haven't seen in a while. There's not a thing in it that I would call cutting-edge, and there's a certain sense of nostalgia that creeps in when reading the in-dialogue expositions that explain the physics and biology of Scalzi's odd universe; it's probably the least adroitly handled part of the book, but still, nostalgia has its value. And being seventy-five years of age, at least in terms of experience, does make a sizable difference in how you react; there's a lot less insecurity, and a lot less angst. (Thank god.)

There's definitely Scalzi humor laced throughout it, which is to be expected; less expected, a genuine sense of regret, loss, and almost veneration for things that are taken for granted in our daily lives: husbands, wives, friendships. In fact, I would say that in a very, very understated way, Scalzi manages to be completely honest, and his wisecracking Perry is vulnerable in an unapologetic way.

This book made me laugh out loud several times; it made me smile, it made me wince in recognition, and in the end, I left it feeling happier for the experience. I wanted it to be longer. I really did.

* * *

Stephan Zielinski is another first novelist, but unlike the first two books, his novel traverses familiar terrain — in this case San Francisco and environs — and makes it strange. Very, very strange. It's hard to call this a contemporary fantasy...although it is. It's hard to call it anything that isn't its own.

First warning: This book is written entirely in present tense, which some people may find jarring. Second warning: There's no exposition. There's no real concession to the engineering mindset. If you *have* to know how everything works in order to make yourself at home, you're never quite going to feel comfortable in this book. Third warning: In the same way Zielinski makes no nods to the ponderous, he makes no nod to the familiar; if you have to be able to point at a character and describe him in a few succinct words (other than "crazy"), you're not going to find a lot to grab hold of here. He doesn't sit still long enough.

Despite all of that, if you start this book, there's a very good chance you'll be sucked in regardless of whether or not you need the struts. So what do you need to know? There's bad magic in the world, but it doesn't generally affect people who can't see it. Seeing it involves the use of the third eye, which isn't

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impossible — but what you can see can also see you, and that makes things tricky if you're one of what passes for good guys.

Al Rider is a young man with a penchant for magic, an ability to use it — in the odd ways that Zielinski encapsulates magic — and a great desire to show off. His friends — the bickering, almost antisocial crew who often gather at his mess of a home — are part of an organization, a cell in the Opposition that monitors the bad magic, and tries to contain it. Most of the members of cells like this don't last long, and with good reason.

Whitlomb had the pleasure of teaching Al Rider at Miskatonic U; he's the professorial elder statesman of the group. Maggie-Sue makes the word *antisocial* look cozy; she's an elementalist who gets dragged into what passes for the real world by a short dead man, also part of the team. Chloe Lee is a girl with a great third-eye and no discernable ability to protect herself from what she sees; Kristof Arbeiter is a cyclist with a penchant for fighting and shooting; Creedon Theibaud might as well be the psycho Invisible Man. Max Sturgeon is the almost-mundane who's theoretically their leader, and doesn't believe half of their babble, because he's mostly sane.

In all, it's like a geek parade with power thrown into the mix, and the mix shines. Particularly when the going gets tough, dead dogs appear, and cultists — of the less friendly but more crazy variety — are threatening to do a lot more damage than a group of argumentative crazy people want to see happen to their dirty, deranged city.

There's an edge to Zielinski's writing, his spare use of words, his often cutting dialogue and his almost repulsive but nonetheless compelling characters that makes one sit up and take notice. His take-no-prisoners approach demands attention; his black insider humor, his panache, and his sheer breakneck speed reward that attention.

Pay it.

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For several years now, Robert Reed has been our most prolific contributor, averaging more than one story every three issues, so we tend to assume most readers know his basic author bio: he lives in Lincoln, Nebraska, with his wife and young daughter; is the author of such novels as Marrow *and its forthcoming sequel,* The Well of Stars; *has a healthy interest in sports; and thinks in unpredictable ways. But no mention yet has been made of his semiofficial Website. Should you like to see a bibliography of his works or any of a half-dozen interviews with him, point your browser to* http://www.starbaseandromeda.com/reed. *Should you like to read his latest skewed vision of the future, keep reading here.*

Poet Snow

By Robert Reed

FOR YEARS SHE HAD BEEN their neighbor and that was all she was: a quiet, solitary woman with a passion for long walks that took her to every end of their little city. Everyone must have seen her, at least in passing. She looked to be in her thirties, and then her forties — a small skinny creature with long purplish-black hair, smart gray eyes and a Roman nose, with a face handsome enough to catch the notice of a few men but never so pretty that the local women regarded her as a threat. In cold weather, she wore oversized coats and high boots, and there were still plenty of winter months in that northern latitude. This was one of the new cities born during a very warm century — a community that sprang up in the midst of what had been a shaggy spruce forest and peat bogs. One hundred thousand people had migrated from the sultry, overcrowded south, drawn by cheap land and nostalgia for old-fashioned winters. It was an utterly modern city, diverse and clean, aesthetically united, and despite that unity, surprisingly lovely. The woman lived near the city's largest park, alone inside a tiny house. Yet her yard covered several

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hectares of rocky ground, and unlike almost every landowner, she had maintained the original spruce forest. That fact alone made her notable. People might not know who the walker was, but everybody understood what was meant when they heard the "Christmas tree place" mentioned — a dark blue-green woods surrounded by a simple split-rail fence, both the house and its occupant left invisible from every outside vantage point.

Her immediate neighbors knew a good deal more, of course. They saw her with some frequency, and over the years, they had managed more than a few conversations with the woman. Given the chance, she was nothing but pleasant. She could smile and make small talk, and if pressed, she relinquished little clues about herself. Her name was Brenda Liles, for instance, and she was an artist. Just what sort of artist remained a mystery. People eventually settled on the term "poet." Ms. Liles had used that word, or she hadn't dissuaded anyone who used it in her presence. But unlike several other local poets, she wasn't a teacher at the city college, nor did anyone seem to know the titles of her work or even under what name she wrote. Some speculated that she was just a strange woman wearing the arts as a kind of camouflage. But then her next-door neighbor managed to learn something incredible. The woman was indeed a poet, yes. But she didn't work with prosaic, old-fashioned words. And since childhood, nothing that she had written had actually enjoyed the honor of being published.

Ms. Liles's neighbor was an elderly woman originally from Haiti and then Orlando. Ruby was outgoing and persistent, and in some cases, relentless. Learning a little bit about Brenda, she wanted to know everything. One summer day, using the excuse of searching for a lost cat — a nonexistent cat, as it happened — the old woman was able to enter the property and find the poet in an unusually talkative mood. The two women stood in a little clearing in the middle of the spruce woods. Above them was an adjustable screen that absorbed the worst of the sun's heat, using that cheap energy to refrigerate the air below. Otherwise the spruce trees would bake and die. Brenda explained the technology with words that no typical poet would have used — soulless words about photons and microclimates and cool-weather photosynthesis — and then with a fondness bridging on true love, she admitted, "These are my favorite trees. The spruces are always the last trees to die before the cold takes all."

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What a very peculiar creature, Ruby thought to herself.

Then she brushed aside her unease. Poets were odd people, by definition, and with that in mind, she summoned up a big smile while asking, "Are you working on something now?"

The gray eyes widened. Amused, the poet said, "Always."

The old woman nearly asked, "What is it?" But then she thought better, forcing herself into a patient silence.

The ploy worked.

Suddenly the artist couldn't stop herself. Years of hard, self-abusive labor emerged as a few decidedly unpoetic sentences. She said, "I'm using nanotechnological techniques to write an epic poem on an impermanent substrate. For now, my work exists in a computer. But later I'll use ice as my medium. Or more to the point, I'll use snow."

"Snow?" the neighbor muttered.

Hearing the word spoken by another made the poet smile. And then, answering a question that her audience would never think of asking, she remarked, "Life is impermanent, just as art is impermanent. So why not gladly embrace the temporary?"

Now what in hell did that mean?

It was a question that might have been asked, but wasn't. Not by a busybody like the old cat-less woman, nor by anyone she spoke to in those next few weeks and months. But at least there was some hint as to what the poet was doing. Her immediate neighbors were amused, and perhaps a few were curious. But the curiosity passed, and through the next winter and spring and into the long northern summer, Brenda Liles was again little more than a familiar figure marching through town, her aging face looking more distracted every day. More focused, and more passionate. Then summer was over, and the distractions seemed to pass. Suddenly she was smiling as she walked, speaking softly to nobody, using a quiet purposeful voice that instantly threw her sanity into question.

That autumn, the local news monopoly received a holo brochure as well as a handwritten note. The note was from a nanoindustrialist with a taste for the arts. "She is one of yours," he wrote in a crimped, inartistic script. "Perhaps you would like to do a profile, before the event."

The "event" was the subject of the elaborate brochure.

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Calls were made to the sponsoring foundation, confirming the basics of the story. More calls were made to Brenda Liles, and then digital pleadings, and finally, a handwritten card signed by reporters, on-camera talent, and several frustrated editors. "We would love to do a story about you," the card claimed. "At your convenience, naturally." But for weeks, the plea went unanswered. The story was nearly forgotten. And then on a chill day in November, the poet strolled into the main studio, wearing a long brown coat past its prime and tall dirty boots, her face looking exhausted but composed. "Now is convenient," she announced. "If you want this interview, let's do it now."

By the next day, the poet moved from a recognized if imprecise presence to become the most famous citizen in the little city.

"I earned this commission twenty years ago," she explained. "But the scope of my work and the necessary technologies...well, there've been some long delays and large technical problems. Not to mention the simple old-fashioned difficulties in writing the bastard poem itself."

It surprised some. But poets can have a genuine potty mouth.

"You'll be writing in the snow," the interviewer mentioned, referring to the brochure glowing on his lap. "Is that what will happen — ?"

"I'm writing with the snow," she corrected.

Then she grabbed the brochure away from him, turning to a chapter near the bottom of its memory. "Each flake is a word," she explained. "Each word is written in a language of my own invention." She spoke in deep mathematical terms, and then without warning, she boasted, "There aren't a hundred people in the world who could read this work. And of them, I doubt if five will understand any of it."

The interviewer stared at his very odd subject. He came close to asking, "Why bother, then?"

But the poet continued talking, happily explaining how the complete poem would be one thousand and three words long, and due to the vagaries of the atmosphere and the chaotic drift of snowflakes, the essential flakes would assemble themselves in the correct order, in the required set of lines, only five or six times on the entire canvas.

"The canvas," the interviewer repeated.

Then to help guide his audience, he said, "You mean us."

She said, "Yes," with an "isn't it obvious?" tone.

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"This snow...this event...it's going to cover our town sometime in January. Is that the plan?"

"Unless there are delays, yes."

It was a foolish and laughable and utterly bizarre activity. But there was more to the story. Nodding, the interviewer mentioned, "This will be a major event, as I understand it. Much of the art world will be watching us."

"The entire world will be watching." She was an artist and a performer, and on the eve of her first show, she shivered with anticipation. "Yes, this will be an event. A spectacle. Like nothing else before, and afterward, this tiny town will be nothing but famous."

THE JANUARY DATE proved too optimistic. Key hardware was late in arriving, and one of the AI climate moderators proved to be lazy, clumsy, and generally incompetent for its job. There was talk that the snow would have to wait until next winter — a small shame, and how would Brenda absorb this disappointment? But she didn't appear sad or even worried. That was the consensus derived from hundreds of sightings and dozens of casual conversations. The poet seemed calm and perhaps even happy, and she acted more willing than usual to carry her side of any conversation. January would have been ideal, she admitted. As spring approached, bringing the first waves of southern heat, her snow would prove more temporary than ever. But that was all right. She wanted to show the world how fragile genius and its art forms were, and that wouldn't change. The middle of February was her working goal, and the goal held until a random ten-centimeter snow fell three days before the event — in effect, spoiling her canvas.

Brenda and the city had to wait for the wild snow to melt.

Winter was nearly done when it was announced that tomorrow was the day. Brenda was seen on the news making final preparations, while the local meteorologists spoke with familiar phrases and minimal knowledge, explaining how the next twenty-four hours would play out.

Snow required cold, obviously.

And moisture.

And in the upper atmosphere, a multitude of delicate events had to

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transpire in the perfect order, if the specially designed snowflakes were to form in the proper fashion before falling with the most effective velocity.

Overnight, an enormous dome was erected over the city and the surrounding countryside. It was invisible and extraordinarily durable — an elaborate hemisphere of ionized particles and nano-platforms, light-eating solar motes and state-of-the-art refrigerating smokes. The early March sunlight was diminished, and much of that blocked energy helped power the feedback systems that deepened the resident chill. There was enough moisture under the dome to build a five-centimeter snowfall, but that wouldn't be ample. The poet had originally proposed a damp snow of twelve centimeters — a very pretty old-fashioned snow, she had promised, augmented by the city's own water supplies — and that's what the various press releases had repeated. But in January, and twice in February, Brenda had quietly increased her projected totals. When asked about the changes, she claimed that twenty-four centimeters was aesthetically sweeter, and she was trying to ensure that the spring heat wouldn't erase her work in a single day, and of course with a bigger snow, she was making it easier to find examples of her poetry hidden inside this wondrous event.

Her neighbors didn't particularly care. The artistic heart of this project had always seemed contrived and foolish, not to mention brilliant in all the worst ways. What they appreciated was the attention from the worldwide artistic networks. What they enjoyed were those moments when savants and warhols were quoted as saying, "This is a great moment for giant art. Not since Addal built the fluorescent ink paintings off Hawaii have we had such a meaningful vision of truth and grandeur...." What people liked best were the video calls from the media and every kind of stranger — people around the world and the moon asking Brenda's neighbors, "What do you think about what's happening? What will you do while it snows? And how can you even relate to a mind like Ms. Liles's?"

Every system was set and operating within the permitted norms. The dome had been erected without incident, casting a convincing twilight over the city, and the chilly March air fell back into full winter. As promised, the snow began on a Friday evening, and it was steady and heavy, and from the beginning, it was wet enough to roll into balls and men. But except for a few vandalistic children, everyone was careful not to disturb what was happening outside the windows. They watched the

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centimeters collect, and they made digital records for themselves, and in the local holorooms, they celebrated this silent and pretty and utterly harmless event. It was art at its silliest, but if adults couldn't be silly now and then, what was the point in being alive?

At some point on Saturday, in the middle of the day, the poet posted new estimates about snow totals. Due to vagaries in moisture contents and the extra effectiveness of the cooling dome, thirty centimeters were likely, while the area near her home would reach forty, or perhaps even half a meter.

Hardly worth the worry, and certainly requiring no panic.

But what concerned some were larger events happening elsewhere. A surge of warm spring air was heading north, ready to collide on Sunday with the great pool of dark chilled air. And more important were the rainboys. Giant lighter-than-air craft used to bring artificial clouds into dry areas, the rainboys had started flying in the spring, gathering up fat white masses of damp air over the oceans, compressing them and impressing them with electrical charges, using the same essential equipment that built the cold dome in order to move moisture to tens of thousands of corporate tree farms and fish farms and steak farms and farm farms. Every year saw problems. One or two rainboys might fail in the same week, and it was possible that several might suffer troubles in the same month. But not in the same day, and it seemed like an incredible coincidence when three rainboys moving three closely spaced clouds failed together, almost in the same minute. Each failure was distinct, and later investigations were less than clear-cut about the causes. Maybe it was just lousy luck. But whatever the reason, each cloud fell apart at its margins, bleeding its moisture into the warm spring air pushing north with a force and majesty that wouldn't stop until it reached the Arctic.

The old half-meter estimates of snowfall vanished before Sunday was half-finished. Sitting indoors, inside modest modern homes, people learned that in the next three days, if the models could be believed, the snows would approach a depth of five meters, or six. Unless the worst-case scenarios proved true, in which case as much as ten meters of wet cold smothering snow would plunge down on their heads.

"The entire world will be watching," Brenda had promised months ago.

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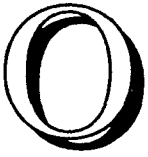
Those words were remembered and chewed upon and discussed and denied. But then it was Monday and the snow was already deeper than any person was tall, and the sun was up but invisible, while the cooling dome was refusing to dissipate, and inside forty thousand homes, quiet voices said, "She meant this to happen."

To one another, and to themselves, people said, "This is what our neighbor had in mind from the beginning."



N HER OWN initiative, Ruby fabricated a holo-room that would admit only those living close at hand. Then she invited her neighbors to a Monday evening meeting. Almost everybody showed; where else did they have to be? But not Brenda. Since yesterday morning, the poet had steadfastly refused every one of their phone calls and e-mails, the same as she was ignoring the interview requests from every media outlet. Yet she remained inside her house. She had to. The dome was highest above her spruce woods, and the storm was squarely focused on her.

"This is a willful and enormous mess," Ruby said, her voice tight and excited and very much scared. "What we need to do is decide what we're going to do. About Brenda, and about everything else, too."

Maybe a hundred homes were represented. People who hadn't looked at each other twice in the last year were now sitting inside the illusionary room, speaking with quick careful voices, and listening too. They were every sort of person — professionals and investment-riders, retirees and tradespeople. Most were physically fit, and many enjoyed the winter sports, their basements and garages full of the very best equipment available from a modern sporting goods department. A small fleet of snowbuggies stood at the ready, and smart-skis for everyone, plus snow-shoes and self-heating clothes, shovels and snow-throwing machines, as well as a small hill's worth of salt. Power wasn't a worry; every house had its own fuel cell generator. But the crushing, smothering weight of the snow scared everybody. What was essential had to be done first, and not everyone had the tools and backbone to help. Teams were created. Strong men and determined women dressed for the Arctic and stepped out into the impossible snow. GPS monitors let them navigate. They gathered what they could of their machinery and each other, and then working fast

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and hard, one house at a time, the teams stripped the worst of the snow off the groaning roofs.

By Tuesday morning, another two meters had fallen. But the houses were safe, at least for the time being.

People rested until noon, eating like lumberjacks and managing little naps. Then the second part of the operation began. Dozens gathered at one of the main intersections — faceless, almost shapeless bodies wearing masks and stiff coats and heavy trousers and boots already half-filled with packed wet snow. Snowshoes were mandatory. Otherwise, their bodies would sink to the crotch, if not deeper. Only the voices betrayed who was who. One voice was easily recognized, asking everyone else, "Are we all here?"

It was the old woman. Half a dozen burly men said, "You shouldn't be here, Ruby. What are you trying to do to yourself?"

"First of all, this was my idea," she reminded them. "And second, the poet is my neighbor. How can I be anywhere else?"

The sharp tone cut off any arguments. Besides, there wasn't time to spare. They had to do this hard thing as quickly as possible, and they had to leave themselves with enough energy and focus to return home afterward, then again, somehow scrape their roofs clean.

"All right," their ringleader declared, waving a heavy mitten. "Let's do this!"

The landscape had been made frighteningly simple, flat and gray-white and barely lit. Almost every landmark had been obscured, and new waves of snow were crashing down on them, choking off vision and muting every sound. At some ill-defined place, the group left the street behind. But no one was sure where that happened or where they had shuffled over the buried split-rail fence. Then the snow sprouted mounds and pillars and neat little pyramids. Under each was a spruce tree, its blue-green boughs twisted and smashed by the relentless mass, while draped over the half-crushed trees were the shreds of the canopy that had always kept the woods cool in summer, and safe.

The smallest men broke the trail for the others. A two-hundred-meter walk absorbed most of an hour. Then the trees were behind them, and the little house revealed itself as a position on the GPS monitors and what looked like a small, very tidy igloo. The first shovel cut deep, finding snow

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beneath the snow. They formed into a rough circle and began digging with hand shovels and mittens, and after forty minutes of intense labor, they had excavated a good-sized pit. Still, there wasn't any roof. A few mentioned what everyone was thinking, that the house had already collapsed under the full brunt of the storm. Regardless, work came to a standstill as everyone gasped and shook their aching arms, ate trail mix and drank from water bottles kept warm under their coats. A few listened to the news on satellite radio. This freak storm and their personal plight was the most important story in the world today. An army of soldiers and civilian workers was being mobilized on the edges of the disaster, but it might be too late. Every distant voice agreed that thousands of lives were in jeopardy, while pundits and legislators tried to outdo each other, describing the kinds of vengeance that would be necessary for a crime of these titanic proportions.

The radios were silenced.

Again, shovels were jabbed into the snow, and two minutes later, the blue-black solar tiles on the intact roof burst into view.

A pair of diamond-bladed saws started to whine and slice.

When the hole was large enough, a limber young man slipped into the dark attic. With a flashlight and some considerable experience in construction, he examined the trusses and floorboards. Then he popped back into view, shouting, "It's pretty close to busting, I think."

"Can you hear anybody?" Ruby asked.

"I don't hear much," he confessed. "Except the groaning boards, that is."

The hole was widened. Saws and more tools were passed down, and then a woman and second man scrambled in after the first man. But they forgot the rope — a buckytube thread wrapped in nylon, suitable for a thousand different jobs. Ruby grabbed it up, and she slid into the attic with a spryness that startled everyone, including herself.

"You need me," she told the anonymous masked figures. Fiercely, she said, "I'm the only who's ever been inside this house."

A lie, but nobody dared call her on it.

They walked the length of the attic, feeling the house shake and moan around them. A fold-out ladder and hatch lay under the insulating aerogel. A simple latch was easily broken, and they climbed down to a darkened

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hallway. No one was home, it seemed. They searched both bedrooms and the kitchen and the little living room, and finally, they found the stairs leading into the basement.

A ruddy light burned somewhere below.

The larger man went first, one hand holding a fire ax. Reaching the bottom of the stairs, he paused and blinked, and a moment later, as the wailing scream began, he dropped the ax, missing his own foot by nothing.

A woman was screaming out in the gloom.

The man cursed and grabbed up the ax again, holding it in a vaguely defensive stance.

The scream became a choked little voice, and the voice chanted, "No, no, no, please."

Ruby stepped past everyone. The basement was an elaborate workroom filled with bottled AIs and other simulation tools. She crossed it in a few strides, the rope still coiled in her hands, ready for every job. You could never tell when you might need to tie something up or secure it from falling. That's why she had brought the rope, and that's why she forgot about it now. She was staring at the poet, marveling at how tiny the woman seemed when she was lying on the floor, in a fetal pose, milky hands thrown over a face ripped by anguish and terror. "Just don't make me suffer too much," Brenda begged. "Have mercy. Kill the artist, but please...don't make it hurt too much...."

The old woman stopped short, stunned now.

Unknown to the intruders, half a dozen cameras were focused on them, piping images to Brenda's official holoroom. Two worlds were watching as Ruby stood above her neighbor. And then, finally, the wise old woman began to understand what this was about.

She laughed, abruptly and with great sadness.

What else could she do?

Ruby giggled and sobbed and knelt on creaky knees. "This never had anything to do with poetry in the snow," she told Brenda. "That was just a convenient disguise, wasn't it? What you're doing here...it's some kind of foolish, contrived performance art...isn't that it...?"

Her neighbor squirmed on the floor.

"The fragility of art and genius. Is that what you hoped to show here?"

Brenda gazed through her spidery fingers.

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"Oh, you poor darling." Ruby dropped the rope and offered both hands, adding, "I feel so sorry for you, you know."

"Don't you want to kill me?" Brenda asked. And then with an almost sorry tone, she added, "I'm attacking your city, your homes. I am a goddess with a cold rage. The Witch of Winter and Despair. Why even come here, if it wasn't to murder me?"

Everybody was laughing now.

"Honey," the old woman purred, a gray-black hand coming out of its mitten, touching the sharp white cheek. "You are very strange and probably mentally ill, and you aren't much of a poet, either. But really, even together, those still aren't good enough reasons to kill anybody."

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Yoon Ha Lee has contributed a handful of fantasy and sf stories to our pages, including "Counting the Shapes" and "Echoes Down an Endless Hall." For the last year or two, the bulk of her creative efforts have been devoted to her young daughter, Arabelle, who at fourteen months seems to be trying to teach her parents ancient Hittite (with little success). Somehow Ms. Lee has found time recently to serve as an editor for The Internet Review of Science Fiction *and to contribute poetry and fiction to* Strange Horizons *and* Lenox Avenue. *Her new story for us is a quietly elegant fantasy.*

Eating Hearts

By Yoon Ha Lee

THEY TELL MANY STORIES in that land surrounded on three sides by ocean, sometimes of foxes with small sharp smiles, sometimes of rats wearing men's clothing. They tell stories of the magician whose tomb was found empty after his death and of bones that beg for proper burial. Sometimes they speak of their first human king, a son of heaven, and his mother, a bear who had become human by meditating in the deepest and most dreadful of caves.

If they mention the bear's companion, it is to describe her pacing in the darkness, unable to sit still, then running out of the cave in shame, unable to become human.

"It's about *not* seeing," Chuan explained to her just after he brought the meal to the table. "The perfect magician is all-blind, all-unknowing. No sound reaches a wall to wake an echo; no touch bridges distance." He leaned back against the wall where, Horanga imagined, the cloth of his shirt hung over the hollow curve of his back. He lived in a house in the

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city, by the river, and long ago the sound of fish swimming endlessly in that river would have distracted her from her purpose.

"Then what do you do in this house?" asked Horanga, looking not at his face or his hands, but at the plate between them. The plate was heaped with tender vegetables, slivers of rare meat, and sliced nuts; over the vegetables and meat and nuts, he had drizzled three different sauces in a tapestry of taste.

"A *perfect* magician, I said." He smiled.

It was important to understand exactly what Chuan, this latest maker of magic, said to her. To do that, Horanga had to ask insolent questions, which was easy because a woman who came alone to a man's house had no pretense of virtue. She had walked away from her mother's family long ago to seek magic, and since no one in her mother's family would acknowledge her, she sought the more interesting thing: magicians. She was a striking woman, tall like a tree in the moment before wind and snow bring it down, and she had long loose hair and lips on the verge of promises.

Magicians were permitted their eccentricities and their dalliances. So Chuan had bought her new shoes, although she needed them not, and a new umbrella besides, and put a purse of his own coins into her hand, and invited her into his house. An old bargain.

Horanga looked back up at Chuan's face by way of his poised hand and the lines of his arm. She had tasted delicacies from every province, and she understood the importance of this moment. As they ate, the two of them, neither looked away from the other. And as they set down their chopsticks after the last mouthful, Chuan said, "I am, of course, far from being a perfect magician."

This disappointed her. "And why is that?" She knew the coquette's art of gazing down and to the side, of the hesitant touch, and disdained to use it. Such gestures belonged to younger women first of all and to women with shallower purposes most of all. A forthright gaze suited her better.

"The near-perfect magician," he said, "desires a single thing only, when desire he must. He desires it so perfectly that nothing else exists, and this is the root that nourishes his magic-making. At other times, in other places, he may live as ordinary men do. But magic with nothing to distract it from its purpose — that is what he shapes."

"So a perfect magician desires nothing," said Horanga, who believed

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in stating things plainly. "And everything becomes possible as a solution to the desire he does not have."

"That is it," said Chuan, and his sober tone pleased her. She had spoken with many a magician in her travels, and not all of them had taken her seriously. "You must have a philosophical turn of mind, to grasp it so quickly. Was it to learn magic that you came here?"

"No," said Horanga with perfect honesty, and her gaze moved to the plates whence they had sated themselves. It was her turn to smile, and she averted her gaze to avoid alarming the man with what was in her eyes. "I am not interested in magic so much as I am interested in magicians."

She spoke of a category rather than a particular, but he understood her well enough.

ONCE, A TIGER WATCHED outside a window, yearning after human skin and human manners, but knew no means of obtaining them except by eating human hearts.

During the night, when half the moon hung low in the sky and its other half shone in fragments from the city's great river, Horanga said to the man beneath her, "For the desire that consumes your heart, O magician, what would you do?"

Other men had answered this question amid silks, or satins, or furs. She was offended by furs, though she should not be. In any case, they had said the expected thing to a woman above them. Chuan pleased her by saying, albeit in a teasing, dream-laden voice, "Other than this? I might walk blindfolded during the darkest hours, with no star overhead, no path underfoot."

It always came back to darkness above all other forms of deprivation. "Would you go into a cave, a place where no light has ever lived, and no wind has ever blown, and even the water has forgotten its wellspring?"

Chuan reached up to stroke a lock of her hair that would otherwise have fallen upon his face. "A perfect magician would see no need, having mastered all distraction. He would also see no reason why not. But a near-perfect magician — why, yes."

"Into a cave while you have only the scantest of provisions to sustain

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you, and only a trickle of water?" Her voice grew lower, deeper, descending.

"Yes," he breathed, letting go of her hair.

"Into a cave with no space to lie down, and scarcely enough room to turn around and around?"

"Yes," he said again.

"Into a cave where the seasons blur into one long languid chill, and nothing varies but the speed of your pulse?"

"Yes."

A TIGER CAN ONLY EAT so many hearts before they start to taste bitter, then sour, then like nothing at all. By that point, even a tiger's own heart, that rarest of delicacies, loses all savor.

Our tiger, who once watched outside windows, is not incapable of learning this.

Toward morning, when languor had fallen upon them and words returned, Chuan asked his own question. "You only ask about reasons to go into the cave and to stay there. Why not reasons to leave it?"

"You are here, and not in a cave. I should think that the question answers itself."

"And so it does," said the far-from-perfect magician. "How many hearts have you eaten, my dear?"

"Too many," she said, indifferent to numbers, but honest in essence.

"Were they all magicians' hearts?"

"Only later," Horanga said, unsurprised by his astuteness. He was a magician, after all.

"If you are waiting for a perfect magician," Chuan said, "you are looking for the wrong thing. You have a mantle of hair wholly black and you walk upon two legs. You did the better thing by refusing to let the cave consume you, long ago. You wanted to be something other than virtuous, which is to say, you wanted freedom. And you have it, which is one thing more than the mother of that long-ago king ever had."

"It is kind of you to say so," Horanga murmured. "But only humans become perfect magicians through their desire, because they need not

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become human first. I have discovered no way to eat hearts, of magicians or otherwise, while leaving them intact. I am willing to be enlightened if it does not require sitting still in meditation to find out."

"Nonsense," said Chuan, and took her hand, which had strong, slender fingers and fingernails that were merely fingernails. "About eating hearts, I mean."

Horanga gazed at him in astonishment.

"I have spent this last night demonstrating how to consume a heart while leaving it intact, as have you," said Chuan. "And it seemed to me that you were quite awake for it. Or do you, in the perfection of your desire, have no heart left for me to consume?"

They tell many stories in that land surrounded on three sides by ocean, sometimes of foxes with small sharp smiles, sometimes of rats wearing men's clothing. They tell stories of the magician whose tomb was found empty after his death and of bones that beg for proper burial. Sometimes they speak of their first human king, a son of heaven, and his mother, a bear who had become human by meditating in the deepest and most dreadful of caves.

If they mention the bear's companion, it is to describe her pacing in the darkness, unable to sit still, then running out of the cave in shame, unable to become human.

But the children of tigers, who are sometimes also the children of men, tell a different story.

—For the tigers in my family.

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David Gerrold is best known for his many science fiction novels, including The Martian Child, The Man Who Folded Himself, *the Chtorr series, and the Star Wolf books. His latest story ventures into the realm of nightmares with a contemporary tale that might not win the ASPCA's seal of approval, but which won't soon be forgotten.*

Chester

By David Gerrold

AFTER THE ACCIDENT, Annie was all I had left. She had a limp, she had a scar down the right side of her face that her hair couldn't quite cover, and sometimes she had a look in her eyes that worried me — not quite frightened, resigned.

Six-year-old girls were supposed to be happy spring butterflies, bouncing from one bright-colored moment to the next. But the giggles of the season were silent. Annie sat alone in her room, holding her doll, the one with the smashed face, and stared at the wall. Not even out the window.

The doctors said she needed time, that was all. She'd been through a lot, and she still missed her mother — but she'd come back to life eventually. When she was ready.

But nobody's ever ready for anything. I knew that. I wasn't ready to be a widower at thirty-three.

I sat down next to Annie and put my arm around her shoulders. She didn't resist, but neither did she relax. She let me pull her close, but she was still a little zombie. I leaned over and sniffed her hair, kissed the top

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of her head, and whispered into her ear, "Have I told you today how much I love you?" She didn't respond.

Out of frustration, as much as anything else, I scooped her up and held her on my lap, hugged her close. "You're my favorite kid in the whole wide world and that's never going to change." I stroked her hair. "Listen to me, sweetheart. I know it hurts. I miss her too. But maybe we can help each other. You know how I come in here and talk to you about what I'm feeling? Well, maybe sometimes if you wanted to talk to me, maybe you could do that and maybe that would help a little bit. What do you think?"

Not even a nod. I knew she heard me, but when she got like this, she seemed unreachable. Words like traumatized and catatonic and withdrawn all flashed through my head, but I hated those words — because the way that people used them, they stopped being descriptions, they became explanations. They turned into life sentences.

"Okay, sweetheart, I'm not going to force you. When you're ready, you come see me, okay? Just say 'okay.' Okay?"

"Okay," she whispered. And that was enough. Not quite a breakthrough, but certainly the possibility of one.

"I'm going to go make dinner now. Let's have something special. Just for us. What would you like? I'll make your favorite."

"Pancakes."

"Pancakes for dinner? Okay, that sounds fun. And bacon too? Will you come help?"

In this case, help meant sitting silently on her chair while I flipped pancakes on the griddle. When I put the plate in front of her, she made no move to eat. "Didn't I do them right?"

"Daddy, I'm scared."

"Of my pancakes?"

"No. Don't be *silly*."

"Okay." At least she was talking. "What *are* you scared of?"

"Going to sleep."

"Going to sleep?"

"I'm afraid...I won't wake up."

My first instinct was to say, "That's silly. Everybody wakes up." But I stopped myself in time, because that wasn't true. We both knew that. So instead, I just nodded knowingly. "Yeah, that is scary." I had a dozen

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questions I wanted to ask, but I didn't want to push too hard. It was more important that she knew it was safe to talk.

I reached over and began cutting her pancakes for her. She could do it, but before the accident she had always asked me to. She used to say "I like the way you do it, Daddy." But today, she pushed my hands away and said, "I'll do it myself."

"Okay." I sat down opposite her and busied myself with my own plate. I wasn't very hungry, but I went through the motions anyway, waiting for her to go on.

"There's this thing in my dream," she said very matter-of-factly.

"What kind of thing?"

"I don't know. It's too dark and fuzzy to see. It's all flickery. It comes from *underneath*."

"Underneath?"

"Uh-uh. *Underneath*."

"Underneath what?"

"Underneath *everything*."

"Okay. What does it do?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" Very carefully, not wanting to put her off, I said, "I don't know, Annie. That doesn't sound very scary to me."

"Well, it is."

"Why?"

"Because it's *there*." She pushed a piece of pancake around on her plate, mopping up syrup. She still hadn't eaten a bite. "It's even there in the daytime. Only I can't see it, because it's always behind me."

"Now, *that* sounds scary."

"It is."

"Mmm," I said. "We're definitely going to have to do something about this."

"You can't."

"I can't?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because it's from *underneath*."

"I see. That is serious. Tell me, who's bigger? You or it?"

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She didn't answer.

"I'll bet I'm bigger...."

Still no reply.

"Well, certainly the two of us together are big enough."

This wasn't going anywhere. I'd have to try something else. How do you fight magical thinking? *With stronger magic.*

"I know what'll work."

She looked up at me. "What?"

"A dreamcatcher."

"What's a dreamcatcher?"

"Just what it sounds like. Take a bite of that pancake and I'll tell you more."

She did and I did. I didn't remember everything, so I made up what I didn't know. "A dreamcatcher is like a net for your dreams. You hang it over your bed and it catches all your bad dreams. Like a spaghetti strainer. And when it's full, you throw it out and make a new one."

Annie looked skeptical.

"It's an old Indian trick. I learned it from an old Indian. We'll make a dreamcatcher as soon as you finish dinner. We'll need some yarn and some feathers and maybe some sequins too. We'll look in Mommy's sewing box — " Oops. For a moment, she was almost interested, but as soon as I said *Mommy*, Annie shut down again. If only I hadn't opened my big mouth. If only.

If only I hadn't tried to make the light —

I got up and went to the sink. I started scrubbing the griddle in fast ferocious movements, furious at myself for having a big mouth, for being stupid, for everything.

"That's okay, Daddy. We can still do it. Mommy won't mind."

I stopped myself. I nodded curtly. Maybe Annie wasn't the only one who needed strong magic.

Annie picked out her favorite colors of yarn, and I found some dowels in the garage, left over from my kite-building period. We tied three of the dowels together to make a triangle, then strung a clumsy webwork of braided yarn and plastic beads across the center. We pulled bright-colored feathers out of Mommy's Halloween boa, it was always shedding anyway, and tied them in rainbow blossoms to each corner. We hung more feathers

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and beads from the bottom. Then we said some magic words over it and hung it on the wall over Annie's bed. "There. That'll catch all your bad dreams. Or my name isn't Mortimer Chuzzlefinger."

"Da-addy!" I hadn't heard that pronunciation in a while, with all the extra syllables. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed it.

"Oh, I forgot. My name *isn't* Mortimer Chuzzlefinger. But don't worry about it. This will still catch all your bad dreams. Snout's Honor. Now go brush your teeth and put on your nightie."

Annie went without argument. She didn't bounce, she limped. She had turned into a serious little soul. I missed my little girl, the one who giggled. I wondered if I'd ever hear her laugh again. I tucked her into bed and hugged her tightly. She accepted it, she even hugged back, but there was still something missing.

The difference between human beings and coyotes is that when the Acme Rocket-Launcher blows up in the coyote's face, he doesn't lose heart. He just goes back to the Acme catalog and orders something else. Human beings never recover from that first awful explosion. We might not walk around with our hair sticking out in charred frizzles and a scorched look of stunned amazement, but we never really regain our trust in a safe and orderly universe either. Once suspicious, we remain suspicious. That's what murders childhood innocence.

I looked in on Annie several times that night. She appeared to be sleeping soundly. The dreamcatcher was on the wall over her headboard where we'd carefully hung it. When she was little, I used to sit and watch her sleep, amazed that any little human being could be so beautiful, even more amazed that I could be so totally committed to protecting her from harm. I'd always thought of myself as self-involved to the point of selfishness, but having Annie in my life showed me otherwise. All I could think about was her smile, the trusting way she slipped her hand into mine, the giggles and laughter. Everything else was...just stuff. I finally went to bed, hopeful that maybe the dreamcatcher was a way to start again.

But early the next morning, even before the sun was up, she came to me crying. "Daddy, the dreamcatcher didn't work — "

I followed her back to her room, where she pointed at the wall. Our carefully constructed webwork had been shredded. The dowels were

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broken and the netting we'd strung had been pulled apart. For a moment, I had the distinct impression that something had fought its way out. I started to say, "Why did you break it — ?" then stopped myself. This wasn't the time for accusations. I scooped her up instead, hugged her, stroked her hair, and whispered, "Wow. That was some bad dream. We're going to need a bigger dreamcatcher." She just held on tight and wouldn't look.

Later, after she was dressed, after she had gone outside to sit under the tree to talk with her stuffed penguin, I took the shredded construction off the wall and examined it. The feathers we'd tied to the corners were all chewed, but not soggy-chewed like a child might do — ragged-chewed as if by the teeth of rats. The dowels too had the same tiny teeth marks. The yarn we'd tied and strung to make a dream-net had been stretched and pulled apart. And for a moment, I wondered if this might be something more than just a child's bad dreams. I even pulled her bed away from the wall and went looking for holes in the baseboard. Nothing. Nothing at all.

I tossed the shredded dreamcatcher into the trash, where Annie wouldn't see it, and wondered if I should make another one. But why would Annie rip it apart? Some deeper, darker thing we hadn't gotten to yet? All I could do was guess.

After a while, I went out to the garage. We had three old tennis rackets that we'd bought at a yard sale for five dollars. I had some metal rods and some nylon fishing line, an old bicycle wheel, and even some piano wire. I could make an industrial strength dreamcatcher, one she couldn't destroy. Maybe I could show her that Daddy was still bigger and stronger than the worst bad dreams she could imagine. That might work.

With the garage door open, I could keep an eye on her while I worked. I started with the three tennis rackets. I used the piano wire to tie them together, with their heads at the center and the handles sticking out at angles, and sprayed the whole affair with shiny black enamel. After they dried, I attached this construction to the bicycle wheel. Now it needed some decoration.

I found what was left of an old kite, a nine-foot-long strip of silver mylar that rippled in the sun; I cut it into ribbons, twisted the ribbons into twirls and wound it around the rim and the spokes of the bicycle wheel. I burrowed into the Christmas decorations and found a box of tinsel and

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another box of silvery snowflake ornaments. I stapled the tinsel to the handles of the tennis rackets, and attached the snowflakes to the nylon webbing at the sweet spot. When I was done, the whole thing was a pretty ghastly affair — but enormously sturdy; you could carry a bowling ball on it. It was a very serious-looking dreamcatcher.

When I called Annie to the garage to see the new dreamcatcher, she stared at it with an appraiser's eye. Finally, she said, "Okay." But it wasn't a signal of affirmation, it was an "okay" of resignation. Yesterday, she had been hopeful, willing to believe. After last night, she was neither.

All right, I had to think about this. Building the second dreamcatcher had been useful. It was something to do with my hands, something to distract me while my subconscious chewed over the real problem — Annie's belief that there was something underneath that wanted to get to her. I remembered the chapters about "magical thinking." Annie needed to believe in something stronger. We all did. That was the essential part of being human. So after dinner, we hung up the dreamcatcher and lit a pink candle and waved feather dusters at it and said some magical words — "By the power of Great Ghu, the God of the Ceiling, let this dreamcatcher be a barrier to all and everything that wishes harm to this household and all who live here." — but Annie's dispirited "okay" reduced the whole thing to a silly performance. If she didn't believe, it wouldn't work. She was at that age where children start to give up belief. So who knew?

"Daddy?"

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"Will you sleep with me tonight? Mommy always slept with me when I had bad dreams."

I hesitated — remembering everything Dear Abby always said about parents sleeping with children — but this was Annie and this was serious medicine, so I said, "Of course, I will."

I tucked her in carefully, then lay down next to her on top of the covers. She snuggled up next to me, pressing her back against my side. She was asleep almost immediately. That was a relief; neither one of us had been sleeping all that well. Not since the accident. The endless cycling of memory had become a chronic pummeling. There was no peace. The slightest noise or irritation and I'd be up. The one person I most needed to talk to was the person who wasn't here. Maybe that was what Annie was

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feeling. But for just this little moment, maybe we could almost pretend that everything was going to be all right. Except I knew better.

The limp, the scar — when Annie was a teenager, these would be almost impenetrable barriers between her and everybody else. These things would set her apart from the world of normal girls. Girls used gossip and manipulation for bullying — little games when they were little, horrendous games when they grew bigger. Sometimes, in the way they interacted, you could see them training to be future harpies, honing the pernicious skills of ripping out the hearts of the innocent. Annie was already self-conscious about her wounds; her teen years would be hell. I'd asked about cosmetic surgery, physical therapy, orthopedic repair, but the doctors said there wasn't a lot they could do now, maybe later. But later might be too late. Her spirit was crippled too.

Eventually, I fell into an uneasy sleep, a swirl of disturbing dreams. Urgent dreams. I had to hide. I had to find a safe place, the safest. I hurried downstairs, down an escalator, down and down — at the bottom, I rushed around a corner, around a corner, ducked under the angle of the rolling stairs, down again, through a narrow hallway and down the cramped emergency stairs, into the cluttered basement, where I ducked behind some boxes — I found a tiny opening, a vent; no, not even that, just a narrow nook underneath the floorboards, I crawled sideways around an impossible angle, down into a deeper space, dark and bottomless, I climbed down the metal ladder, down and down, always downward, until I found the hatch into the pipes below the city — I padded through the dank underbelly of the world, sloshing through tubes illuminated by phantom iridescence, climbing into narrower and narrower pipes, until I found another ladder down, this one leading to ancient stone tunnels, maybe catacombs, I couldn't tell, except after a while, the walls were pulsing, lined with throbbing purple veins and bulbous growths, and farther down, cracks appeared in the walls, glowing red as embers, it was warm here, too warm, uncomfortably hot, molten lava seeping up through the floor, the edges of the rocky crust were limned with flame, I had to jump across the bubbling pits, bottomless chasms too, had I come so far that I would never find my way back? I knew this place. There was something here. Behind me. I turned around and —

Woke up with a startled grunt. My heart pounding.

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I fumbled around for my flashlight, the big heavy one filled with a half-dozen D-cells. Held overhand, it could be used as a club. If necessary. I'd put it on the nightstand next to Annie's bed so she could look to see that there were no monsters in the dark. I clicked it on myself. Yes, there were no monsters. I was actually relieved.

Padded off to the bathroom, fever dreams still resonant. Checked the thermostat. Opened the front door and sniffed the night. Thought about going to my own bed. Thought about a lot of things. Three o'clock in the morning thoughts. All the way down to the bottom one — why does the universe even exist? Why is there something instead of nothing?

I went to the kitchen and poured myself the last of the coffee, still sitting cold in the carafe; gave it a short ride in the microwave, then returned to Annie's room. I stood in the doorway, sipping half-heartedly at the bitter brew until it was cold and tasteless. I didn't want to get back into her bed. It was uncomfortable. But I didn't want to leave her alone either.

We had a big overstuffed chair in the den. I'd fallen asleep in it more than once, usually during some made-for-TV movie on the Lifetime channel. I pushed the chair into Annie's room, grabbed a pillow and a comforter, and made myself as comfortable as I could. I moved as quietly as I could through the darkness. I wasn't planning on staying up all night, watching, but if anything made a sound, I'd be right here. Just before settling in, I flicked on the flashlight, one last time, just to check, I don't know what made me do it —

— stopped. And stared. Above Annie's bed. My carefully constructed industrial-strength dreamcatcher had been chewed to bits, as if something with metal teeth had gnawed its way out. I lifted it off the hook on the wall, astonished and shaking my head and for the first time, honestly worried. Even a little scared.

Carried it into the kitchen and laid it on the counter. The fluorescent lights flickered on, momentarily dazzling me. What the bloody hell —? The bicycle spokes were pulled every which way, the rim of the wheel was bent; the nylon webbing of the tennis rackets was unstrung, with bent and broken strands pointing out at odd angles. It looked as if someone or something had deliberately picked it apart.

All right, there had to be a rational explanation. Maybe it was the

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tension of the wires, maybe I'd strung the whole thing so tight it had unraveled in the middle of the night. Except I hadn't heard a sound. My sleep had been so uncertain these past few weeks, even the slightest rustle was enough to bring me bolt upright in bed. I couldn't imagine this thing twanging apart above my head without my hearing something. Unless I'd been so tired, so exhausted, so lost in sleep, so down in the dream — could the sound of this thing pulling itself apart have triggered my dreams of descent — ? *Underneath*?

No. I wasn't ready to go there yet. I'd read articles about "unexplainable" phenomena that occurred at the nexus of standing waves — electrical, radio, sonic, whatever. Maybe this was like the guy who could hear the six o'clock news on his fillings? Yes, he had voices in his head, but it was only the local Ted Baxter. I tried to remember what I'd read about countermeasures. Put a large bowl of water next to an open window. Hang tinfoil strips. Rearrange the furniture. Install a ground wire. It all sounded like more dreamcatcher stuff. Just another belief system.

I wasn't going to figure it out tonight. I went back to Annie's room and plopped down next to her again. She snuggled into my arm and two blinks later, sunlight was streaming in through the window, illuminating the dust motes like bars of blue silver. I glanced over, saw she was sleeping peacefully, so I eased myself out of bed and went into the kitchen to start breakfast.

Eventually, Annie wandered in, still rubbing her eyes.

"How'd you sleep, sweetheart?"

"Okay, I guess."

"No bad dreams?"

"Uh-uh." And then she said, perceptively. "You had the bad dream for me, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I guess I did."

"Was it as bad as I said?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I can see why you were scared."

She glanced at the broken dreamcatcher. "That didn't work, did it?"

"I guess not." I started flipping pancakes. "We'll have to figure out something else."

We spent the day running errands, dropping things off, picking things up, maintaining all the separate machineries of suburbia. Annie didn't

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fuss; she held my hand and stayed close. I wished there was something I could do for her, some way I could pull her out of the shell she was building — something to distract her from her morbid fantasies of *underneath*.

A thought had been gnawing at me all morning. Annie was lonely. That's all. She had no one to belong to anymore. No one to trust. And no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't break through to her; there was a part of her she was going to keep to herself now.

Inevitably, she pulled me over to the pet store window. She always liked looking at the puppies. So did I — except while she was fussing about each little cute furry personality, I was feeling sorry for them, locked in those enclosures, those cages, like pieces of merchandise, unable to get out, unable to run and play and bark.

And always, the inevitable question; "Daddy, can we get a puppy? Puh-leeeeese? Look, this one's only sixty dollars."

I peered close. Only sixty dollars for twenty-four months. "Uh-uh, sweetheart. Not one of these."

"Why not — ?"

"Um, because — " *Why not*? " — because, these aren't good watchdogs."

"Why do we need a watchdog — ?"

"Because I can't sleep with you every night. We need a special kind of watchdog — a dream watchdog. A little pooch to snuggle up next to you and not let any bad dreams get in. Just like I did."

"Oh." She considered it. I could see her turning the thought over in her head. "Well, where do we get a dream watchdog?"

"Mmm, well, I dunno.... " I was barely a half-step ahead of her. We had been talking about a puppy, maybe for Christmas, but what with one thing and another, including a new baby on the way — we'd decided to wait a year, until Annie was bigger. Now, however, maybe a dog was just the right thing.

"I know — let's go to the animal shelter. I'll bet they have good dream dogs there." Annie grabbed my hand and started pulling. I let myself be led back toward the parking lot. By the time we got to the car, Annie was already making plans for her pound-puppy. "I'll give him my blue blanket, okay? And he'll sleep on my bed with me, okay? And I'll call him — um, what's a good name for a dream watchdog, Daddy?"

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"Well, it's been my experience that you have to live with a dog for three days, and at the end of three days, you'll know what his name is."

She nodded. "That sounds good."

The animal shelter is a depressing place. It's clean, the dogs are all well-cared for, the staff is friendly and helpful — but you know, going in, that there aren't enough homes for all these imploring hopeful faces. Only the young ones, the cute ones, the healthy ones are likely to find homes where they'll be loved. Annie limped in behind me and I realized again that she was no longer one of the cute or healthy ones. People would look at her, and then to me, and I could see the flicker of pity behind their eyes — *that poor man, having that poor disfigured child.*

The puppy cages were closest to the entrance. There weren't many to choose from. A scruffy and scraggly-looking lot. Except —

"Daddy, how about this one?"

"He's awfully small — "

"Oh, no — he's just the right size."

The card on the cage said he was a gray terrier-poodle mix, eight months old. To my eyes, he looked like he was half poodle, half opportunist; but his tail was bobbed. That indicated breeding, perhaps for show. Silvery fur, darker on top; not quite curly — kinky. He was all dreadlocks. He needed grooming. I didn't think there was very much dog inside all that fur, but he had bright attentive eyes. He watched us both, his gaze flicking back and forth between Annie and myself, then finally fixing on her as the most likely mark. He stood up, putting his paws against the bars, and tried to shove his tiny muzzle through, his tongue already licking toward Annie's fingers. She held out her hand the way I'd showed her, the back of the hand so the dog could sniff without being able to nip. He skipped the sniff, went right for the lick — this little pooch was people-friendly. More than that, he was desperate to be let out of this cage.

Without asking, I knew his backstory. It was a familiar one. This was last year's Christmas present to somebody, maybe somebody's child — and now they'd gotten tired of it, and so they discarded it, tossing it away as if it had no feelings of its own. This frantic little hairball had invested his whole being-ness into belonging to someone who couldn't be bothered to repay loyalty in kind. He had to be feeling confusion and hurt and fear. I hunched down on my knees and offered my own hand. "What do you

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think, little guy? Do you think you can stand guard over my Annie here and keep her safe from bad dreams?" It was an awfully big responsibility for such a little dog. He couldn't have weighed very much. Six, maybe seven pounds. I wondered if he was too small, if he'd be a yappy little nuisance; was that why he'd been abandoned to the system?

But there's this about dogs. When you look into their eyes, if all you see is a dog, then it's just a dog; but if you see a little furry person there, then he's part of your family, take him home. I wasn't sure about this guy, yet — but there was something very alive and real behind those eyes. "Do you like this one, Annie?"

"Oh, yes, Daddy. Very much." And then, she stopped herself. "Will he be a good dream dog?"

"Well — he's a terrier. And terriers are good at catching rats. So he should be a good watchdog for bad dreams. Let's go see if we can adopt him."

There was a lot of paperwork, more than I expected, and it took a while. Annie quickly grew impatient, which under other circumstances would have annoyed me, but I was secretly pleased to see her so excited, so I told her to go wait by the cage and keep her new puppy company, so he'd have a chance to get to know her. "Talk to him and let him know we're paying his bail." She didn't get the joke, but that was okay, she went anyway.

By the time I finished, Annie was sitting on the floor in front of the cage with the puppy happily curled in her lap. A thoughtful attendant had arranged it. "His name is Chester," she announced.

"Chester, huh — ?" The little guy's ears pricked up and he cocked his head at me.

"See? He already knows his name. Are we done? Can we take Chester home now?"

"Sure, we can." I reached out and let the little guy sniff my hand. He licked my fingers happily. Hell, if I'd been locked up in one of these cages, I'd have licked a few fingers to be let out too.

On the way home, we stopped at the local Petco for dog food, pet bowls, a collar, a wire brush, shampoo, flea and tick treatment, a nametag, a chew bone, a couple of small squeaky toys, a box of dog cookies, and a pet bed — a blue velvet pillow, impossibly decadent. "But he won't need his own bed, Daddy — he's going to sleep with me."

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"Yes, sweetheart, but he still needs a bed of his own for his afternoon nap. Dogs like to have their own special places, just like people." The total bill was over one hundred and fifty dollars, and we still weren't through. We still had to have doggie shots.

Annie spent the rest of the day showing Chester around the house and the yard, carefully explaining everything to him. "This corner of the back yard, this is where you poop. This is the kitchen, this is where we'll feed you dinner. This is my room, this is your bed here — " Chester dutifully sniffed the blue velvet pillow, then lay down in the center, as if to demonstrate he understood that this bed was his.

"But at nighttime, you'll sleep over here with me, Chester." Annie scooped him up and put him on her own bed. Chester repeated his performance, carefully sniffing the blanket and pillows, finally settling himself in the most comfortable place to curl up for a nap — right between Annie's two favorite stuffed toys, a pink teddy bear and a big blue bunny. "Daddy, look! Chester likes my bed."

"I'm sure. It's the nicest bed in the whole house." I was beginning to have concerns that Annie was going to smother Chester with affection, that she saw him as a toy, a living teddy bear that she could cuddle forever. But if Chester was a normal terrier, he'd set his own rules soon enough.

Very quickly, Chester revealed his own distinct personality. He didn't like to play tug of war, not even with a clean sock toy — actively disinterested. He preferred to play chase-the-squeaky. And sometimes roll-on-your-back-and-bite-the-squeaky. And most often, toss-the-squeaky-at-your-feet. When he got tired of that game, he did laps from the kitchen to the dining room to the living room, down the hall to Annie's bedroom, then back again to the living room, through the dining room, and skittering across the kitchen floor to a hairpin turn at the washing machine to do it all again. Annie laughed out loud, the first time since the accident. This had been a good decision.

Later, I tucked Annie and Chester into bed together. He snuggled in like a happy little lump. Annie petted him and whispered something in his ear, something about being a good guard dog against bad dreams. He licked her face, as if in happy agreement.

A half hour later, I peeked in on the two of them. Both were asleep, but Chester had quietly gotten down off Annie's bed and gone to his own

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pillow in the corner. I scooped him up — he didn't protest, he almost didn't even wake up, most puppies are that pliable — and put him down next to Annie again, a furry little comma. Still asleep, he stretched his legs out briefly, then relaxed again.

I puttered around for an hour, cleaning the kitchen, straightening up the living room, glancing into my office, wondering if I should try to get some work done, then finally, feeling like nothing in particular, I gave up. Just before heading off to my own bed, I checked in on Annie one more time. Chester was back on his velvet pillow. Once more, I scooped him up and put him down next to Annie. He trembled slightly, an odd reaction, then relaxed back into a deep sleep.

Annie woke me up, crying. "Daddy, there's something wrong with Chester!"

I glanced blearily at the clock — it was legally morning. Somewhere. I rolled out of bed with a sinking feeling and followed Annie back to her room.

Chester was lying on the bed, trembling, whimpering. When I put my hand on his side, he flinched and yelped — but he didn't lift his head. I scooped him up and held him gently in my arms — he screamed, a strange sound for such a small animal, breathless wails of panic. I slid my palm around his narrow chest, feeling for a heartbeat. It felt too fast for me, but small animals have very rapid heartbeats and I'm no vet. I had no idea if this was normal. He shivered in my grasp — not the nervous shivering that small dogs are prone to, this was something else.

Annie watched us both, wide-eyed and too afraid to speak. I continued to hold the little pooch against my chest, lowered my face to the top of his head and began whispering. "It's all right, guy. You're a good boy. Everything's all right." He stopped crying, but he continued to tremble.

"Is he going to be all right?"

"I think so. He's just scared — "

Abruptly, I remembered something from a dozen years ago — another terrier, a short-haired sweetheart named Biscuit, as tan as a perfect pancake; when she put her ears up, she looked like Anubis. She loved people, she loved to play, and she was apparently fearless. I'd take her with me on walks to the store and back. When we turned onto our block, I'd take her off the leash so she could run free all the way home. She bounced

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with excitement. Except one time — she hadn't gotten more than a few bounces ahead when two huge German shepherds dashed out from behind a hedge. One of them grabbed her firmly by the neck; the German shepherds were young, barely a year old, just big overgrown pups, and they had come running out to play, except they were used to playing rough and Biscuit hadn't seen them coming, she was caught by surprise. If an eagle had swept down from the sky and plucked her away, she couldn't have been more frightened. She let out a wail of panic like nothing I'd ever heard before. It turned into a series of long hurtful cries. The German shepherds backed away, startled, and I scooped up Biscuit so fast she didn't even realize it was me — she just kept on crying, trembling in panic. "All right, all right. It's okay." I looked her over carefully. Her fur was ruffled, but she hadn't been bitten — just grabbed hard. I held her close and tried to comfort her all the way home, but she wouldn't let me put her down. She was terrified. And when we did get home, she ran for her bed and stayed there until the following morning.

But that had been a tangible event — Biscuit had been grabbed by a much larger, momentarily ferocious animal that had leapt out of nowhere and ambushed her. This was...I didn't know what it was. Why was Chester crying? I'd seen dogs dreaming before, even having bad dreams — two or three short whimpers, maybe some leg motion, and then the moment was past. But this — Chester was behaving as if he'd been in a fight, grabbed and shaken and hurled against a wall.

I looked to Annie. The first question that came to mind was the one I didn't dare ask. *Did you do something, Annie*? And if I did ask it, I wouldn't get an honest answer. "Did you see anything, Annie?"

She shook her head.

"You didn't roll over on him by accident or bump him, did you?"

"Nuh-uh. He just started crying all of a sudden. He woke me up." And then she added, "Chester was having my dream. He was barking and growling at the *underneath*. But I wasn't scared, because Chester was protecting me, just like you said he would. And then — it — it — and he screamed and I woke up and he was — he was like that, and I came to get you. Is he going to be all right, Daddy?"

Chester was calming down. He'd stopped crying, stopped whimpering, and his trembling had ebbed to periodic spasms — short, intense

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bursts; normal for a small excitable dog, but something had freaked this dog, that was certain. I started to put him back down on the bed, but as I lowered him, he went rigid and resistant; instead, I carried him over to the corner and settled him down on his own pillow. He sat trembling, eyes wide, staring up at me.

"All right, let's get dressed. We'll take him to the doctor. He needs his shots anyway." At first, I'd wondered if perhaps Chester had been bitten by a spider or stung by a bee; but if he had, he would have gone into shock by now.

Chester didn't want to stay in Annie's room. He followed me back to my bedroom and stayed close to me while I pulled on my pants and an old sweatshirt. Then he followed me to the kitchen and stayed close underfoot while I made a fresh pot of coffee. Annie fixed herself a bowl of Cheerios, but barely touched it.

The vet's office didn't open until nine, but I knew the staff was there at seven to take care of the in-patients. I called ahead, and we pulled into the parking lot the same time as Dr. Brown. He took Chester from Annie's arms and squinted as he held him aloft. "Looks like a dog," he said. "Only smaller. Did you get him in a Happy Meal?"

Michael Brown was an old friend; we followed him inside. He put Chester on the table and listened to his heart, peeked into his ears, and even took a blood sample. He fingered Chester's bobbed tail and said, "He's probably had all his shots, but let's not take any chances. I'll give him boosters."

"But what about his bad dream — ?" Annie asked.

Michael Brown looked to me. I gave him the short version. Annie added, "Chester is my dream watchdog."

"A dream watchdog, eh? Any other symptoms?"

I shook my head. "No. Just the crying and the trembling."

"Any vomiting?"

"I didn't see any."

"Diarrhea?"

"No. Nothing." A thought occurred to me. "Could it have been a seizure?"

"Not from what you describe. It sounds like he had a bad dream." Dr. Brown peered into Chester's face again, then rubbed his head affectionately. "You look fine to me."

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I wasn't satisfied. "A bad dream? That bad? Can dogs have panic attacks?"

Dr. Brown shrugged. "Dunno. It was his first night in a strange place. You don't know what he might have been through before you got him. He doesn't look abused, but it's possible he heard a sound that reactivated a very bad memory. It happens to people, it happens to animals. Have you ever seen a St. Bernard scared of lightning?"

"No."

"Not a lot of fun." He handed Chester to me. "Take him home. Let him rest in a quiet dark corner. Keep an eye on him. Call me if anything changes, but he should be all right."

Logically, I knew there had to be a rational explanation for all of this. But the sequence of illogical events argued for a more compelling and mysterious pattern — and whether there was logic or not was ultimately irrelevant, because Annie believed in the logic of her dreams.

And so did I. In the cold yellow light of the afternoon, all bad dreams seem silly. But I could still feel the troubled resonance of my own downward journey. I spent the afternoon prowling through my files on phobias, panic attacks, unreasonable fears — and successful counter-therapies as well. There wasn't much here that I didn't already know. Most of it boiled down to "don't invest any more energy into the fear; that only makes it larger."

That meant no more dreamcatchers, magic spells, or even dream watchdogs. We had to invest our energies into something positive and joyous. Except — that was the problem. I had a little girl without a mommy, with a scar and a limp; a little girl who had lost her joy somewhere between Highway Twelve and the intensive care unit. There was no joy anymore, because Mommy never woke up.

What there was was the slow, steady, step-by-step, plodding through the process of "learning to live with it." How did I explain to her that the pain never goes away, it just becomes another part of you? You end up adding it to the mosaic of your life, a particularly hard-colored moment that you spend as little time as possible dwelling on. When you're six years old, how do you learn to do that?

By afternoon, Chester was ready to play again, as if nothing bad had happened last night. Annie spent the early hours of the evening tossing the

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squeaky toy for him. She even started calling him "doodle-bug" because of the way he doodled the toy around before finally giving it back. He punched the little red ball with his nose, tossing it toward her, obviously inviting her to pick it up and throw it for him. Annie laughed exuberantly, held the toy high, then hurled it down the hall. Chester bounced after it.

When bedtime finally rolled around, both Annie and her little doodle-bug trotted off obediently. Annie limped. Chester trotted, with the squeaky still in his mouth.

The little gray dog settled himself on his pillow, the red ball between his paws, and adamantly refused to get back up on Annie's bed. Every time I lifted him up and put him next to Annie, he promptly jumped right back down to the floor and went to his own place. Annie tried calling him and patting the bed next to her, but he just curled up and ignored her. Her crestfallen expression said it all.

"Maybe he's still feeling bad from this morning. It's all right, sweetheart. I'll stay with you." I tucked her in, then kicked off my shoes and lay down next to her. After a moment, I got up, scooped up Chester and put him between us. I put a hand on his back, not to hold him down, just to reassure him. He looked at me for a moment, then put his head between his paws. He looked sad. Or resigned.

Annie drifted off to sleep quickly. I thought about getting up and tiptoeing out, but the instant my breathing shifted, Chester's head came up. His little button nose sniffed the air. His eyes weren't visible in the darkness, but I could feel a sudden tenseness in his posture. He growled — it wasn't much, but then he wasn't much of a dog; just a little bit of meat and bone, and the rest was dust-bunny and attitude. His growl was so high-pitched, it was almost a cartoon — but he was serious. I remembered an old saying; it's not the size of the dog in the fight that counts, it's the size of the fight in the dog.

"It's all right, mini-pooch," I said, patting his flank. "There's nothing there." His growl faded. After a bit, he put his head down again. Resting, not sleeping. Every so often, his head would come back up, as if he were staring at something on the other side of the wall; he'd watch the unseen threat for a bit, then lower his head again. Occasionally, he'd mutter a soft meaningful "werf."

I woke up a couple of hours later. I didn't know why. Just a sudden

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awareness. Annie was sleeping soundly next to me. Chester lay between us, stretched out comfortably. Whatever threat he'd imagined, either it was gone or he was too tired. I got up and headed to the bathroom. I checked all the doors and windows, made sure all the lights and all the appliances were turned off, then headed back to Annie's room. Everything was all right there as well. So I padded off to my own bed. Maybe we were finally over the hump. Maybe.

Just before dawn — I was halfway down the hall before I realized I was awake, responding to an unearthly scream. Too high-pitched to be Annie's voice — but it was. Or maybe it was her scream dissolving into the tail-end of whatever had screamed first.

The light from the hallway shone a bar of brightness into her room. Annie had leapt backward out of bed, trembling in her nightgown, backed against the wall. Her bed was askew as if something big had picked it up and thrown it sideways, the sheets and blankets ripped and disheveled, and toys and books and clothes torn from her closets and drawers and shelves were everywhere. Annie pointed, still gasping —

"Where's Chester?" I didn't wait for an answer. I pulled back the blankets. The little dog lay limp on her bed — at first I thought he was dead, but his heart was beating rapidly. His breath was shallow; with my hand on his side, I could barely feel any motion. He looked shredded; he was covered with dozens of tiny bites. I peeled back his upper lip; his gums were pale. He was in shock.

Annie's face was crumpled in terror; she was half-crying, half-screaming. I grabbed her and held her. I didn't even try to ask what happened, I just scooped her up and held her. With one hand, I fumbled for the flashlight, then cursed and gave up. I flicked the light switch. Still carrying Annie, I turned on all the lights. There was nothing there. Nothing anywhere. I spotted the flashlight where I'd left it the night before and grabbed it. I could use it as a club, if I had to. I looked under her bed, in the closet, checked the windows, then set Annie down, ran my hands up and down her sides, her arms, checked her head; she seemed unhurt.

Turned back to Chester —

"Is he going to be all right?"

"I don't know. Put on your clothes. We'll take him to the doctor." I checked again to see if he was still breathing. He was very still. I pulled on

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my pants and a sweatshirt, grabbed the car keys and my phone. I lifted Chester carefully, cradling him in one arm; with the other hand, I punched for Dr. Brown. Annie was pulling on her bathrobe and limp-hobbling toward the door to the garage.

Michael Brown met us at the back door of the clinic.

"I'm sorry for waking you — "

He ignored it. "Come on in the back."

We followed him in. He switched on lights as he went. "Put him there — " A cold stainless steel table. He opened a cupboard and pulled things out. Syringes, tiny bottles, a surgical kit. "Annie, go stand over there. I want you out of the way. David, over here." He switched on a bright overhead light. He peeled back Chester's eyelids, peeled his upper lip and looked at his gums, even lifted up what was left of the little guy's tail and examined his rectum — to see if the muscles were still tight. He plugged a stethoscope into his ears and listened to Chester's heartbeat and breathing with a grim expression. At last, he grabbed syringe and a bottle of adrenalin. A quick injection directly into the heart. He listened again with the stethoscope, frowning.

Abruptly, he pasted three electrodes onto Chester's little gray chest. He switched on a monitor and the machine next to it and grabbed the defibrillator paddles — smaller versions than the ones on television. The monitor showed a very shallow, very uneven heartbeat. Dr. Brown applied the paddles; there was a short sharp sound and Chester jerked. Then he lay still again. A second shock, still no change.

"Daddy — ?"

"Sometimes it takes a couple of tries, sweetheart."

"Take her out of here," Michael said.

I scooped her up and we went out into the waiting room. I sat down on the bench and held Annie in my lap.

"He's going to die, isn't he?"

"I don't know, sweetheart. I don't know."

"He doesn't deserve to die. He saved me."

"Saved you?"

"From...it."

I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing.

"He saved me," she repeated.

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"Yes, he did," I agreed.

"He's a good dream watchdog."

"Yes, he is."

"He didn't let...*it*...get to me."

"No, he didn't."

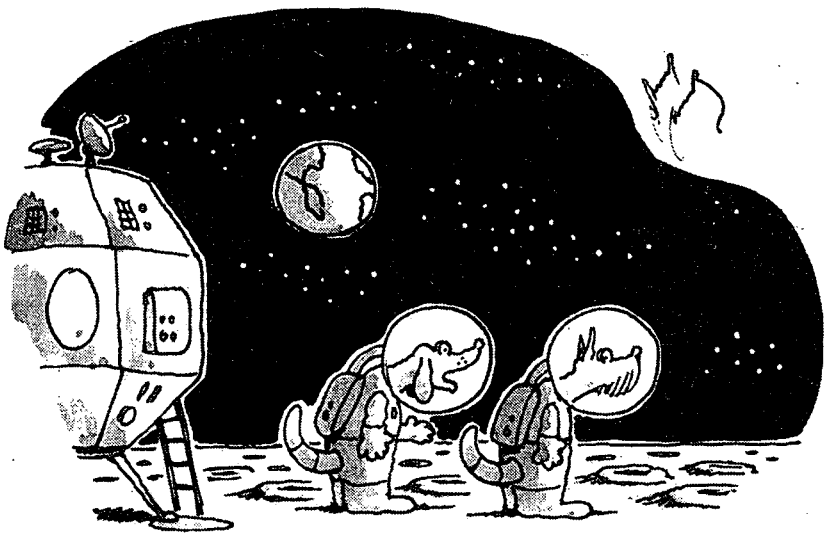
We sat for a while in silence. Waiting. Annie leaned her head against my chest and was very still. I wondered if she'd fallen back asleep, but I wasn't going to shift my position to see. When Michael Brown came out of the back, she was instantly awake again. Michael looked grim. He shook his head without saying anything.

"What was it — ?" I started to ask, but his expression was guarded; he wasn't going to discuss the details in front of Annie.

"He's dead," she said. "Isn't he?"

"I'm sorry, sweetheart." Dr. Brown went down on one knee so he could look her directly in the eye. "I did everything I could."

"I know," she answered calmly. Then she looked up at me. "Daddy?" she said. "We're going to need a bigger dog."



"That's strange. I thought I would bark like crazy when I got up here."

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Harry Turtledove, the master of alternate history stories, presents us here a speculation of a different sort: a brash contemporary satire that is most definitely not politically correct. It calls to mind what John W. Campbell told Military Intelligence after he published Cleve Cartmill's "Deadline": shutting down the magazine will look more *suspicious than if you just let us continue to publish.*

See you all next month (we hope)!

Bedfellows

By Harry Turtledove

THERE ARE PHOTOGRAPHERS. There are strobing flashes. They know ahead of time there will be. They leave their rented limo and walk across the Boston Common toward the State House hand in hand, heads held high. They're in love, and they want to tell the world about it.

W is tall, in a conservative — compassionate, oh yes, but conservative — gray suit with television-blue shirt and maroon necktie. O is taller, and his turban lends him a few extra inches besides. His *shalwar kamiz* is of all-natural fabrics. He's trimmed his beard for the occasion — just a little, but you can tell.

"How did you meet?" a reporter calls to the two of them.

They both smile. O's eyes twinkle. If that's not mascara, he has the longest eyelashes in the world. Their hands squeeze — W's right, O's left. "Oh, we've been chasing each other for years," W says coyly. Joy fills his drawl.

"It is so. *Inshallah*, we shall be together forever," O says. "Truly God is great, to let us find such happiness."

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News vans clog Beacon Street. Cops need to clear a path through the reporters so W and O can cross. A TV guy looking for an angle asks one of Boston's finest, "What do you think of all this?"

"Me?" The policeman shrugs. "I don't see how it's my business one way or the other. The court says they've got the right to do it, so that's what the law is. Long as they stay inside the law, nothing else matters."

"Uh, thank you." The TV guy sounds disappointed. He wants controversy, fireworks. That's what TV news is all about. Acceptance? One word — boring.

The State House. Good visuals. Gilded dome. Corinthian colonnade. The happy couple going up the stairs and inside.

More reporters in there. More camerapersons, too. O raises a hand against the bright television lights. More flashes go off, one after another. "Boy, you'd think we're in the middle of a nucular war or something," W says. He always pronounces it *nucular*.

"Nuclear," O says gently. "It's *nuclear*." You can tell he's been trying to get W to do it right for a long time. Every couple needs a little something to squabble about. It takes the strain off, it really does.

"Can we get a picture of you two in front of the Sacred Cod?" a photographer asks.

"I don't mind." W is as genial as they come.

But O frowns. "Sacred Cod? It sounds like a graven image. No, I think not." He shakes his head. "It would not play well in Riyadh or Kandahar."

"Aw, c'mon, Sam, be a sport." W has a nickname for everybody, even his nearest and dearest. And he really does like to oblige.

But O digs in his heels. "I do not care to do this. It is not why we came here. I know why we came here." He bends down and whispers in W's ear. W laughs — giggles, almost. Of course, maybe O's beard tickles, trimmed or not.

W gives the reporters kind of a sheepish smile. "Sorry, friends. That's one photo op you're not gonna get. Now which way to the judge's office?"

"Chambers. The judge's chambers," O says. You wonder which one was brought up speaking English.

"Whatever." W doesn't care how he talks. "Which way?" There's a big old sign with an arrow — ⇨ — showing the way. He doesn't notice till one of the reporters points to it.

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He and O start down the hall. A reporter calls after them: "What do you see in each other?"

They stop. They turn so they're face to face. They gaze into each other's eyes. Now they have both hands clasped together. Anyone can tell it's love. "We need each other," W says. Even if he doesn't talk real well, he gets the message across.

"My infidel," O says fondly.

"My little terrorist." W's eyes glow.

You've seen couples who say the same thing at the same time? They do it here. "Without him," they both say, each pointing to the other, "I'm nothing." O strokes W's cheek. W swats O on the butt. They're grinning when they go into the judge's chambers.

The justice of the peace looks at the two of them over the top of her glasses. How many times has she done that, with how many couples? "You have your license. I can't stop you. But I do want to ask you if you're sure about what you're doing," she says. "Marriage is a big step. You shouldn't enter into it lightly."

"We're sure, ma'am," W says.

"Oh, yes," O says. "*Oh*, yes."

"Well, you sound like you mean it. That's good," she says. "You're making a commitment to each other for the rest of your lives. You're promising to be there for each other in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad."

"We understand," O says.

"I should say we do." W nods like a bobblehead, up and down, up and down. "We already look out for each other. Why, if it wasn't for Sam here, my poll numbers would be underwater."

O beams down at him. "My friends need infidels to hate, and W makes hating them so easy. Take Abu Ghraib, for instance. You'd think he did it just for me."

"Nope. Wasn't like that at all." Now W's head goes side to side, side to side, as if it's on a spring. "We both had fun there. We share lots of things." He grins at O. "See? I told you I'd bring you to justice."

O laughs. "All right."

The corners of the justice of the peace's mouth twitch up in spite of

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themselves. She doesn't meet devotion like this every day. "Let's proceed to the ceremony, then." She reads the carefully nondenominational words. At last, she gets to the nitty-gritty. "Do you take each other to have and to hold, to love and to cherish, as long as you both shall live?"

"I do." W and O answer together. Proudly.

"Then by the authority vested in me by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, I now pronounce you man and, uh, man." Even though they're legal, the judge is still new at same-sex marriages. Who isn't? But she recovers well: "You may kiss each other."

They do. In here, it's nothing but a little peck on the lips. They wink at each other. They know what the cameras outside are waiting for.

N EXPLOSION, a fusillade of flashes when they come out into the hallway. You can see W's mouth shaping *nucular* again, but you can't hear him — too many people yelling questions at once. You can see O tolerantly nodding, too. He knows W's not about to change.

A guy with a great big voice makes himself heard through the din: "Is it official?"

"It sure is," W says.

"Have you kissed each other yet?" somebody else asks — a woman.

"Well, yeah," W answers. The reporters make disappointed noises. W and O wink at each other again. Sometimes they're like a couple of little kids — they seem to think they've invented what they share. "We could do it again, if you want us to," W says.

The roar of approval startles even him and O. O grabs him, bends him back movie-style, and plants a big kiss right on his mouth. W's arms tighten around O's neck. The kiss goes on and on. Another zillion flashes freeze it in thin slices so the whole world can see.

Everything has to end. At last, the kiss does. "Wow!" a reporter says. "Is that hotter than Madonna and Britney or what?"

"Than who?" O doesn't get out much.

W does. "You betcha," he says. If his grin gets any wider, the top of his head will fall off. Is that a bulge in those conservative gray pants? Sure looks like one.

"Where will you honeymoon?" another reporter calls.

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"In the mountains," O says.

"At the ranch," W says at the same time.

Not quite in synch there. They look at each other. They pantomime comic shrugs. They'll work it out.

Still hand in hand, they leave the State House. "Massachusetts is a very nice place," O says. "Very...tolerant."

"Well, if they put up with me here, they'll put up with anybody," W says, and gets a laugh.

"Gotta take you to meet the folks," W says as they start back toward the limo.

O raises an eyebrow. "That should be...interesting."

"Well, yeah." W sounds kind of sheepish. His folks are very, very straight. Then out of nowhere he grins all over his face. "We can do it like that movie, that waddayacallit I showed you." He snaps his fingers. "*La Cage aux Folles*, that's it." You think W has trouble with English, you should hear him try French. Or maybe you shouldn't. It's pretty bad.

"You *are* joking?" There's an ominous ring in O's voice.

"No, no!" W's practically jumping up and down. He's got it all figured out. He may not be right, but by God, he's sure. "We'll put you in a bertha, that's what we'll do!"

"A what?" O says.

"Come on, Sam. *You* know. You ought to. You've seen 'em close up, right? One of those robe things that doesn't show anything but your eyes."

"A *burka*?"

"That's what I said, isn't it?" W thinks it is, anyway.

"The *burka* is for women," O says in icy tones. Then he smiles thinly — very thinly. "Oh, I see." He draws himself up to his full height, straight as a rocket-propelled grenade launcher. A cat couldn't show more affronted dignity, or even as much. "No."

And W laughs fit to bust. He howls. He slaps his knee. "Gotcha! I gotcha, Sam! Can't tell me I didn't, not this time. I had you going good." He pokes O in the ribs with a pointy elbow.

"You were joking?" O looks at him. "You *were* joking," he admits. He laughs, too, ruefully. "Yes, you got me. This time you got me."

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W gives him a hug. You can't stay mad at W, no matter how much you want to. He just won't let you. "I'm glad I've got you, too," he says.

And O melts. He can't help it. "I'm glad I've got you, too — you troublemaker," he says. They both laugh. O goes on, "But maybe we could meet your parents another time?"

"After the honeymoon?" W says.

"Wherever it is," O says.

"I love you," says W. "You made me what I am today."

"And you me." O kisses W, and they walk off across the Common with their arms around each other's waists.

Coming Attractions

Our offices receive submissions in a steady stream—occasionally a trickle, mostly a babbling brook. Lately it seems like we've been getting a torrent of good material, and we think you'll like what has bubbled up.

Bruce McAllister brings us one of next month's highlights with "Hero: The Movie." This homage to the giant menace movies of the 1950s (like *Them!*) gives us a twenty-first century look at the genre. Don't expect the professor to come up with an easy solution to this story's menaces!

Also on the schedule for July is a new trip to the Silurian era, compliments of Steven Utley. In "Promised Land," we'll get a taste of what sort of sacrifices must be made in the present for the sake of the past.

Since laughter is the best medicine, next month we'll also bring you the therapeutic results of our latest contest (which your editor mistakenly claimed would be in this month's issue—soon he will learn how to count).

For now, you can count on more good stories to come in the months ahead, including Claudia O'Keefe's tale of magic doings in West Virginia, "Maze of Trees," and a daring new story by David Gerrold entitled "thirteen o'clock." We've also got new stories in the works by Geoff Ryman, Bruce Sterling, Gardner Dozois, and Scott Bradfield. Subscribe now and rest assured you won't miss any of the fun.

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Marc Laidlaw appeared regularly in our pages in the '80s and '90s, but he was lured away from our field by the computer gaming industry. Now that Half-Life 2 *has hit the stores, Marc has more time to focus on his fiction again, and in recent months he has published new work in* Sci-Fiction *and elsewhere. His latest story for us is a strange and compelling fable.*

Sweetmeats

By Marc Laidlaw

AT FIRST LITTLE HUGH thought it was rats. Rats in the wall by his head, down low on the floor where his mattress lay. He had seen them often enough, darting down the hall to the kitchen, and he came upon their nests in the narrow crawlspace where he sometimes went for privacy. He imagined their curved teeth gnawing away, almost the same stained yellow color as the crumbly plaster they chewed.

His sister had always feared they would come in at night and eat them, but she did not wake to see if her dream would come true. Hugh alone watched and watched the spot where the sound was coming from. He watched until the wall began to tremble, and a piece of it bent sideways and opened like a little door, hinged on the wallpaper.

Out came not a rat, but a little brown man. Very little, very brown. His head barely reached the lower ledge of the windowsill.

"Is this your house?" the little brown man said. "You live here?"

Hugh twisted and looked over his shoulder to make sure his sister was still sleeping. She was. The rest of the house was quiet as well; his parents

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often fell into a stupor long before Hugh could find his way to sleep. Some nights he never even closed his eyes, but lay awake with his head so empty that the darkness inside him and the darkness outside were exactly the same. That was very restful. But now, except for Hugh and this little intruder, everyone was asleep.

"Who are you?" Hugh whispered.

"I asked *you* a question."

"I'm sleeping in it, aren't I?"

"Right," said the little man, and turned to peer back at the hole he'd made. "You won't fit through this."

"Why would I want to?"

"We need to get you out of here, under the house. Right away."

"Keep your voice down," Hugh said, "you'll wake my sister. And I'm not going anywhere with you. Not...not unless you tell me who you are."

"No names until we trust you."

"You trust me? Why should I trust you?"

"Do you know *Mbe'lmbe*?"

"*Umbaylumbay*? Who's he?"

"Foo. But it is not your fault you are such an ignorant child. If you knew the name, you would know that you can trust me. We have had secrecy forced upon us for so long, the world has forgotten us. Answer me this, boy. Is there another way under your house?"

"The crawlspace."

"You get there how?"

"There's a piece of screen under the porch. I peel it back."

"Very well. Put on your shoes and go there. I will meet you and then we proceed."

"I'm not that crazy."

"You can wear your pajamas — it's warm enough where we're headed. But shoes you may need. Now hurry."

Hugh plucked at the flannel pajamas that had been his solitary Christmas present, his solace on these bitter nights in the drafty little house. When he looked up again the flap of wallboard was swinging back into place. The little brown man was gone.

Hugh's dilemma. For the moment, he was free to do as he chose. Surely such a little man couldn't force him to do anything he didn't want

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to do. It was up to Hugh himself whether he crawled into the cobwebby dark beneath the porch, or fell back into his pillow and tried to sleep.

A moment later, the pillow was cooling and the sheets lay thrown back. The bed was empty, Hugh's decision made.

"Well done, little man," the little man greeted him from darkness as he scraped through the wire mesh. Hugh kept a candle stub and book of matches in his crawlspace nest. As the light flared, the man's pupils glared briefly golden like a cat's. "Now make haste with me. Our time is short."

In the middle of the crawlspace floor, the raw dirt had been pushed up in a gaping crater, a mole mound dug up from beneath. Into this, now, the little man lowered himself. One hand thrust up and beckoned back to Hugh. "It's narrow here, but soon widens."

It was also dark. Putting his face above the opening, he felt a breeze coming up, strong enough to make the flame flutter. He expected the subterranean wind to carry a tomb smell, something as musty as the suffocating damp beneath the house. Instead, the breeze was redolent of unexpected sweetness. Cinnamon. Mint. The rich, dark, intoxicating scents of coffee, vanilla, and above all else, chocolate. The passage was crudely hewn by pick and shovel, hardly fit for a grave-tunneling ghoul, but the smell disarmed him. He dropped down easily, rock shards digging into his knees and palms. The candle went out during the descent.

"This way," said the voice in the dark, calling from the direction of the smells. "You won't need the light. There is no false turn you can make. And soon you will see well enough."

He followed the scrabbling sounds of toes and knees in earth. It was hard to breathe, with his head tucked low so that he wouldn't bang his forehead on the ceiling. When he stopped to catch his breath, the vapors that filled his nose and lungs were intoxicating. An intense miasma of candyshop smells: Licorice and lemon, caramelized sugar, a marshmallowy sponginess to the air. It was growing more humid, rich with scents to drown out the raw smell of the earth they stirred up as they scrambled. At last he realized he could see the silhouette of the little man ahead of him. The light was very dim and sourceless, and it stayed that way for the longest time, like twilight in a dream where it is always twilight. Even

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when it brightened, it could hardly be called bright, being only barely lighter than the palest dusk. And in that subterrene glow, he realized the little man was standing upright now and urging him to do the same. With his hand on his head like a protective cap, Hugh raised himself to full height, and found that the ceiling was now higher than he could reach. Their journey through the narrow passage finished, he wondered what kind of place he'd come to.

"Where are we?" he asked. "Why have you brought me here?"

"We are home."

"Whose home?"

"Are you not a lonely, lonely child?"

He sensed he was in some kind of sunken forest. As his eyes adjusted ever so slowly to the gloom, he saw looming shadows, blurred shapes like enormous trees that stirred not at all in the gentle sweet-scented wind. He reached out to touch a tall trunk, and his fingers sank into velvety softness until they reached something cold and hard as glass. He put his fingers to his nose, wondering if this was the source of sweetness, but the softness reeked of mildew, rot and mold, a trillion fetid spores disturbed by his questing fingers. He sneezed and stepped away. Was this the source of the velvety light that seemed to emanate from the very walls? Did mold blanket every surface? But what...what had lain beneath the mold before it grew? Why did the shapes cloaked in damp gray matter seem far too complex and convoluted to be explained away as the stalagmites and stalactites of even the most fantastical cavern?

Again, he asked, "What is this place?"

"Not yet, little man. Sad little mad little *ignorant* little man."

He sighed, exasperated, ready to refuse to budge. But at that instant, something lurched from the gray folds of moldy dimness. A chuckling sound turned whining and insistent. Sudden puffs of upset spores, far off in the dark, came steaming closer, like the chuffing plume of a gray locomotive rushing at them. His guide let out a muffled shriek and seized his hand and first pulled, then rushed around behind and shoved him forward.

"Run!" the little man hissed. "Run, run, run, run, run!"

The thing behind them advanced almost soundlessly, but Hugh could hear a gathering of soft explosions like puffs from a huge mouth. A blast

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of mold dust robbed him of sight. He shut his stinging eyes and staggered forward, only to find himself falling. Thick tepid mud enveloped him, acrid and foul, and also riddled with mold. He came up gasping, as beside him his sputtering host insisted, "Swim and we'll be safe! Push on! It has never yet dared to cross the great river!"

So he swam. Struggling through thickness, he came at last to a crusted slope where the mud had hardened into cracked plates, where he could fit his fingers into crevices and drag himself ashore. It was scarcely a relief when he heard, "We're safe."

In the gray distance behind them, that immense puffing came again and again, then settled down as if sobbing itself to sleep. He tried to imagine what could make such a sound: so soft and yet far-reaching, so full of disappointment and dismay.

Now he and the little brown man were exactly the same shade of muddy. The stuff was cold and sticky, as well as foul-flavored, obliterating whatever pleasure the sweet-scented air might have brought him. His host, muttering something about making themselves presentable, pulled Hugh to his feet and dragged him on, casting worried glances back at the density of darkness behind them. He thought he heard something sigh, and gather itself. He felt his host's urgency quicken.

Hugh had lost his shoes in the suction of the river. Now they trod a carpet of brittle grass that crunched and crumbled underfoot; he walked on splinters of broken crystal, but they did no damage, seeming to dissolve as his full weight came down upon them. Each step produced a range of icy tinkling notes.

"So this is your home," he said, "but who are you?"

"I told you before, we are *Mbe'lmbe*. The last of our kind, and I am our king, although such titles mean nothing in our slavery, for they mean nothing to him."

"Him? Who is he?"

"The Successor. The Factor. Our Master. Now, in here, quickly."

His host, the King, opened a door into a place that was slightly less gray and dim than the grim bank they had surmounted. Hugh stepped onto cold concrete and a shiver went through him. One yellow bulb burned blearily, far away down a corridor whose walls were spotted and stained with age and ooze and the salts of the earth, crusted and nitred and yet

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somehow still smelling sweetly. A corroded fan spun overhead, creaking in the sugary breeze. That sweetness poured from a vent near the corridor ceiling, and the vent was caked with dusty white grit like that which formed on the battery terminals of an old car.

The King tried closing the door behind them, but it was warped and Hugh could see that it was rarely used. Leaning against it with all his weight, the little King managed to slide the latch home, and left the crooked door straining against a darkness that seemed alive enough to ooze around its edges.

The King scurried down the passage, his bare feet slapping the stained cement. Tiles of white and black, chipped and broken, sometimes missing entirely, gave the sense of grander days — an immaculate past, when such things must have mattered to someone. They passed another vent, spilling forth such a richness that Hugh was caught short by it, and hung there gasping and gaping like a fish hooked on the wondrous vapors.

"What...what is that smell?" he asked. "Where is it coming from?"

"From the only part of this place that still functions as it should," replied the King. "The Factor's reactor."

They had left the lone bulb far behind when another door, much smaller than the other, appeared on one side of the hall. The King opened it for Hugh and waved him through with some ceremony. For a moment, it was dark, and then a light sprang on.

This room was strangely prosaic, so ordinary that it struck him as completely out of place.

There was a bed pushed into one corner, a small bureau, and a porcelain sink with dripping taps. A few books sat piled on the bureau, all covered in dust, with gilded titles in Latin and French, some bound in leather, still others in yellowed horn. Above that was a mirror in which he saw himself, completely covered in the filth through which he'd swum.

The King pulled open the topmost drawer, and inside Hugh saw a plain white shirt, a pair of short pants, a rolled up pair of socks. A flattened cap sat neatly atop this pile. The King toed around beneath the bed and pulled out a pair of shoes that seemed as if they probably would fit.

"Whose room is this? Whose clothes?"

"All were his, at one time, but he has forgotten this place exists. Those clothes should fit you, since you are now his age when he came

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here. I will leave you alone to groom yourself, and then we must make haste."

The King bowed and withdrew, leaving Hugh alone with the distinct impression that he had better not take a single moment to wonder what was happening to him.

He stripped out of his pajamas and ran water from both taps until they ran clear after twin bursts of rust. The soap was an antique yellow sliver, but he used it sparingly, and it almost lasted till the end. It was quite some time before he felt he was really clean. He sponged himself with a washcloth that hung from a rack by the sink, then dried with a towel hanging from a peg. A black plastic comb sat on the rim of the sink, and as he lifted it, he became transfixed by the sight of one golden hair tangled in its broken black teeth. He set it down, feeling that to run it through his hair would have been like brushing his teeth with a stranger's toothbrush.

The clothes smelled of cinnamon and cloves, and were surprisingly soft, although ragged. As the King predicted, they all fit, though the pants were large in the waist. He used a coil of soft cotton rope, discovered in a drawer, to belt them. A jacket hung on the back of the door. Last of all, he settled the cap on his head to hide his bedraggled curls, and found that fit him too.

Curious about the room's former occupant, he turned to the books on the bureau. Some were volumes of history, dictionaries, and medical tomes. The horn-bound books were written by hand, as if copied out by monks, yet appeared to be cookbooks of some sort. Flames and loaves of bread were represented there; minutely observed drawings of exotic herbs and berries. Other of the books proved to be journals. One of these sat by itself in the middle of the desk. He picked it up and opened it to a page marked with a slip of gold foil.

The penmanship was neat and disciplined, yet something about it told him it was a child's handwriting.

— so much responsibility, thrust on me so fast, and I'm unsure I am worthy of it, tho He thinks I am. I mainly worry how I can continue once He's gone, as He says He soon must be. He says I have much promise and will have many Helpers and will surely discover my own talent though it seems all hidden now. He says the hands and

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wisdom of all the Helpers are also mine to command, tho really that does not seem right. Why should anyone have to do whatever I —

"Little Master, we must be off!"

The door stood open. The King waited expectantly. In the interim, he also had cleaned and groomed himself. Hugh, without a second thought, closed the small journal and slipped it into a pocket of his jacket, feeling as if it belonged there, as if the pocket were stretched in exactly that shape from constant carrying.

He was beginning to feel very odd indeed.

The King of the *Mbe'lmbe* nudged him sideways out of the passage. He tried looking back the way they had come, to the far-off door by the muddy river, but it was all black down there now, and he couldn't tell if lights had gone off or if the tunnel had simply filled up with darkness. A new light winked like a baleful subterrene Polaris from far off in the yet untraveled dark. It beckoned him. The complicated smells of rust and nitre had begun to exert a hold on his curiosity as strong as — and even stranger than — the syrupy fumes that were so much a part of the atmosphere.

They proceeded through what had been a sculpted arch, once no doubt quite ornate, now a sad affair of whitewashed beams and broken plaster that had mostly crumbled away. Dragging his fingers along the wall, he caught a few flecks of the stuff, and brought it reflexively to his mouth and then his tongue. Sweet. It was sweet as sugar yet stale as old pastry, like a sacrificial wafer from a mummy's tomb.

And thinking mummy thoughts, he was wholly unsurprised when a boat emerged from the cavernous gloom, and he found himself at the shore of a rancid Styx. There was no oarsman, no one to take the helm of the high-prowed ship, and in fact they were not to board the weathered craft. It lay canted against a splintered wharf, tied to stanchions striped like faded barber poles, and so thickly furred with lint and dust that he believed they must be ancient candy canes. The oars lay piled within like broken bones.

"Once, but no more," the King murmured with mixed regret and relief. "The very essence of efficiency, it took its toll."

They hurried past the ruined ship and down the dark sweet throat from which the candyshop scents issued, the stagnant river lapping at their side. It was hard to imagine what stirred the river now. There was no

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wind, no current, yet thick little waves tracked them for a time, as if the boat were rocking to the motion of its hidden cargo, or as if something immense had lowered itself into the scum and begun to swim. Not far along, the little King caught sudden hold of Hugh's wrist. Hugh wondered why this should be until he saw, in mounds of darkened earth, glittering white crosses running parallel to the river's course, row upon row like sharks' teeth layered back into the darkness. Some of the little graves were set with delicate candy skulls, and the crosses themselves must be sugar. So many...a holocaust down here in the darkness...the graves so small and close-set that at first he thought they must all be the graves of children, until he felt the King's trembling and realized these were all his people. Not a single marker bore a name.

He counted a hundred paces along the river's edge, with a grave for every pace; and that was only in the nearest row. He forced himself to stop counting, but the graves went on unnumbered. They grew more irregular, spaced farther apart, as if the things they held were increasingly large. The earth looked split and dried, like a cake that had baked too long, the doughy interior swelling up from beneath.

The King had closed his eyes and clung to Hugh, his brow damp, his lips moving in feverish prayer.

Finally they were past that dreadful place, and Hugh thought he might ask a simple question, but the King's eyes sprang open and stopped him from even considering it.

"Do not concern yourself with them," he said firmly. "It is my burden alone — I, who brought them here. You are here for the sake of the living."

"But...." The question he had been burning to ask. "Why me?"

"Why? It is the only way open to us now. Once there was another way, but in his madness he forsook it. Crazed and companionless, he has forgotten all goodness. He has forgotten life. Sugarbirds once sang here, but they have fallen silent. He has been too long without others. I did not show you all the graves."

Hugh swallowed, assuming he should be grateful for this mercy. The King's eyes were terrible.

"Now here," he said, "say nothing. Do not show pity or contempt or anything untoward. Especially not fear! Keep your thoughts shut up close. There must be no commotion."

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They had arrived at another unexpected door, the appliqué letters pale and peeling. Once they had read SWETESHOPPE, though applied all askew with an unsure hand. The King clenched the knob and opened it into a smell such as Hugh had never imagined.

It was sweetness mingled with sweat, smells of toil and grief, vanilla and excrement, odors of violet and urine, butchershop blood and confectioner's sugar. He caught himself at the threshold, unwilling to take a single step inside, until the King tugged at his wrist and he knew he must come. He started to put a hand to his mouth, but the King sensed his intent and slapped his hand down. He went forward smiling and bowing and beckoning at Hugh to stay beside him.

All about them towered piles of glazed cooking pots, spiraling copper coils, gauges with needles trembling, steam spouting from high pipes, cages. Everywhere cages. He could not quite see what was in them, apart from the eyes, but that was enough. Eyes like boiled sweets, rolling and watching them, disembodied orbs with bright candy centers that shook and rattled and stared as they passed. That was only for starters. The cages grew larger, the air more rank and humid, the sugary sweetness more cloying and more fetid. There were things in the cages, short and dark, that might have been people once, though now they were little more than enormous mouths with tubes going into them, and rich thick liquors bubbling through the tubes, and even greater richness straining the dark skins to bursting. In some places they had stretched until they split, and raspberry liquors oozed out between the cracks.

"Show respect," the King whispered, bowing and turning to all sides as they advanced.

"But were they, are they, people?" Hugh whispered in return, although to do so meant he must inhale uncontrollably.

"No...not quite...never. Not these. Not alive, exactly. Without constant irrigation, they would expire immediately. But He...*He* has not the strength to end their misery. He starts but never finishes. The creator who cannot also understand the need for death should never have been given such power in the first place. Theirs is an endless suffering."

"If they aren't alive, then how can they suffer?"

"Look at them. Look into their eyes and see if you can still ask such a question."

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But he could not. He couldn't even be certain where to find their eyes without straining close into the dimness of the cage, which was not something he felt strong enough to do.

"Please," he said, "I don't like it here."

"I'm not sure which are more to be pitied," said the King. "These, or the ones that have achieved a kind of existence...the ones that have managed to escape."

Hugh recalled the sound of the soft puffing mouth, the stirring of the stagnant river. He began to retch.

"Now, now. We are almost through."

At the far end of the room, a door showed through a jumble of nut husks and toppled cages; the floor was deeply grooved and scratched where it had been hauled open countless times. As the King released him to haul on the door, Hugh looked back and saw the caged things watching him, desperately sad, as if waiting to be eaten, wanting it, fearing it, knowing it was never to be.

"Steel yourself," said the King.

But as the door flew open in a warm waft of wind, it was hard to know how this could be worse than what he'd just seen — how it could be anything bad at all. The buttery smell of chocolate was so intense it obliterated all other odors. Instead of dimness, there was light; instead of cloying humidity, the warmth of a friendly kitchen; instead of screams and despondent sighs, the cheer of sputtering pots and hissing kettles. Blended scents of cinnamon, dark cherry and sweet cream, orange essence and pistachio, rosewater, lime and sugar on the edge of burning but not quite. All these and more wondrous odors came cutting through the chocolate, mixed with it, set his mouth watering. He realized he was ravenous. In the world above it must be morning now — breakfast time. Thinking perhaps the light and warmth had been decanted down through pipes and mirrored shafts from the world above, he squinted up toward the source of that golden radiance, but it was too brilliant to behold directly. He saw the mouth of an immense oven, a furnace that burned his eyes, forging vision into something simultaneously bright and dark.

"Look away," the King urged him. "It will blind you! Look down low and you will see him."

Afterimages of the furnace sizzling on his eyes, he scanned the wide

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expanse of the chamber, searching till he saw movement far out on a distant plain. A man, tall and thin, almost skeletal. Hugh saw a top hat, a long black coat with tattered tails, a face white as chalk with a sharp white beard and sunken eyes.

The face saw him and reeled him in...he felt himself drawn across the spotted, stained, and sticky floor. The figure reared up to its full height.

The white face with its stiff goatee gazed severely at him with eyes mismatched, one crazed and cracked like a faded gumball, the other blue as a robin's egg, bright and quite alert. It whipped swiftly down and sideways to aim a silent reproach at the King, then up it lashed toward Hugh.

"Huh-hullo," he said.

Stained bluish lips peeled back from teeth so impossibly foul and decayed that Hugh's jaws began to ache with sympathetic pain. They were broken stumps, ground down to nothing, splintered and eroded. Those that were not entirely gray were yellowed like antique ivory. It was an overly generous grin, most of it gum, and the gums even worse than the teeth because they were so clearly in distress.

"And you are?" said the reedy voice from that terrible, reeking mouth.

Hugh would have staggered back, but the King of the *Mbe'lmbe* put a shoulder hard to the back of his thigh and pushed him forward. But without abandoning him, for the King held hard to Hugh's hand and thrust it up as if for that gumball eye's consideration.

"He is your successor," stated the King.

"I need none."

"Master, your time has ended. All who know you know this for the truth. Pass on the work that was passed to you."

"What I have learned cannot be passed along. I need no apprentice, and I have no heir."

"But this is he! There is none worthier! None so pure! None so sweet!"

"Sweet, you say?" The gumball eye, looking as if it had been worn by repeated sucking, spun toward him. "You...boy...you do look familiar."

"As well he should."

"Still, he means nothing to me. Why do you say I should know him, eh?"

The top-hatted figure of the old Master thrust forward to catch at

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Hugh's collar and cuffs, muttering all the while: "...is sugar...is life...." The fingers, he noticed, were sticky with honey and butter and chocolate. The white beard was stained with chocolate; bright red dabs of jam gleamed at the corners of the awful mouth. Louder now, the muttering, and closer in his ear: "Life is sugar and sugar is life." The fingers roamed his body, feeling his ribs. "You need fattening up. You need sweets. Nice sweets. You need this."

Hugh blinked. Beneath his nose, a bar of chocolate appeared as if from the thin man's sleeves. He started to take it, but the King hauled down his arm by the elbow, with a whispered, "No!"

The thin man laughed down at the little King. "What do you fear? That he will eat and never want to leave?"

"You know that is not what I fear!"

The white face leaned closer to Hugh again, bent down like a jack-in-the-box on a wobbling spring. "Go ahead...take a bite...."

The chocolate so close, beneath his nose, smelled delectable. Only the King's fear held him back. There was something here he did not understand. He clamped his jaws shut and shook his head.

"Well, then...save it for later...." The long white fingers drifted toward his pocket, pulling it open ever so slightly, dropping the chocolate bar in, patting the pocket to make sure it was safely ensconced.

And then, "What's this?"

The hand retracted, sticky fingers pinching the bound journal he'd carried with him all this way. "What...where did you find this?"

The brown King looked mystified, as baffled as the old white man.

The old gent opened the book to the page with its golden marker, and his lips began to move. Hugh thought he was reading the journal entry there, but in fact his eyes were not upon the page. He plucked out the golden bookmark and his eyes grew watery and distant. He turned his gaze to the handwritten pages, and flicked his eyes over several lines. His lips trembled. He looked up at Hugh, then gazed with growing rage at the King of the *Mbe'lmbe*. His rotten teeth gnashed; flecks of spittle sprayed from his foaming mouth. He tore the top hat from his head and hurled it down upon the floor.

"Why show me this?" he began to scream. "Why cast me back upon that shore?"

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"I...I...it was a mistake," the King began. "Please, Master...."

"After all I have done for you? Wretched imp! Is this how you show gratitude? *Sacre sucre!* I have come too far to be tripped up here!"

"Master! Master, you are forgetting what you put in place! Let me help you remember!"

Hugh found his arm gripped ever more firmly by the King.

"Remember, Master? Remember?"

Looking down, he caught the glimmer of a knife in the King's hand.

How quickly it had appeared! Where had it come from, and why?

He struggled to move away — so sharp! But the *Mbe'lmbe* held him tight.

"Do not be afraid," said the little King soothingly. He found himself unable to resist. He wanted to trust the King. He saw his small white hand held almost tenderly in that much smaller brown one. He clenched his hand into a fist, but the King deftly uncurled his pinky finger and held it so it stuck straight out.

With a sharp swift slice, he lopped off Hugh's fingertip.

Hugh bit his lip. He did not cry out, both because he feared to show fear before the hungry gumball eye, and because he felt no pain.

The King of the *Mbe'lmbe* stepped forward with Hugh's fingertip extended. Hugh looked at that and not his hand. He saw a round pink stub with a soft moonshell of fingernail, still quivering, still unaware it was no longer part of him.

The old Master took the offering and held it up to the fierce oven light, regarding it from all sides, uncertain. He gave the little King a most curious questioning look, to which the King responded with a firm nod.

The old man licked his lips with a dry gray tongue, then popped Hugh's fingertip into his mouth.

Hugh gasped as if feeling the old man's rotten teeth in his flesh.

The old Master shut his eyes. He bit down once, and Hugh heard a brittle crunching. He bit down twice, and Hugh heard the juices squirting. The Master's eyes opened, rapt and delirious, delighted, a broad smile spreading over his face, transforming it in an instant into the face of a very old and wizened child.

"My God!" he crowed. He rolled his eyes.

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"I tried to tell you, Master," said the King.

The old man rushed toward Hugh and caught him up beneath his arms — caught him and threw him high into the air. He felt the furnace breathing over him, felt it might gape and swallow him whole.

"Yes, that taste, that wonderful taste...it comes back to me! Oh, sweet victory! Oh, ecstatic sweetness, *sacre sucre!* The taste of sunlight to the leaf! My boy, my dear boy, what a terrible misunderstanding! Oh happy day! Oh joy to you, joy to us all!"

He set Hugh down, and patted him tenderly on the head. "But...do you not see, my boy?"

He fluttered the golden bookmark, and on it Hugh saw scratches of writing, thin letters incised in the foil and glinting. The lines were short and broken, like lines of poetry, like something else. Like...like....

"The recipe!"

"For what?" Hugh asked.

"When I first drew you from the oven, ah, so small...." He held his fingers to show a mere pinch of boy. "So pink! Yes, yes! Dusted in pink sugar, my marzipan boy...so warm and fresh and sweet, with the raspberry coursing through you. Why, I could have eaten you whole!"

The old confectioner's eyes gaped, bulged, oozed sugary tears, staring at something beyond.

"Come with me, my boy. Come now...this way...while the mood is upon me, while change is in the air, quickly now, quickly!"

Hugh realized, as the old man's hands led him firmly along, that the glazed eye was fixed on the enormous oven. Above them burned an orange sun of flame, bright enough to have lit this and a hundred other underworlds; but that was the top of the chimney. At floor level, coming closer, was the door of the oven.

"This way! This way! Right along here! Your heritage, my boy...your birthright, and your birthing place. Exactly as intended, yes, I remember it now. Exactly! You were to take this burden from me when I was too weary to carry it. You were to be raised at my side to continue my work, taught from my books, fed from my fingers.... And look what time it is! We must be quick, lad, quick!"

They paused at the gate of the immense furnace. Thick glass barely held back the volcanic fires within. Intense heat caused the oven door to

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bulge and blister toward them. The old confectioner reached out to twist a silver knob, and just like that the flames died down to nothing, and went out.

"Here, lad, have no fear! It's completely cool! Put your hand upon it!"

Hugh put out his hand and touched the glass. The furnace roar was less than a whisper, and the heat had died down completely. The flame still burned somewhere in the heights, but down here it was cool.

"You will learn such secrets now, the mysteries of the oven will be yours...come up, come up!"

The oven door drew up like the portcullis of a castle. He reached unbelieving into the cool interior, black walls speckled with gray, long racks that seemed to continue for miles back into darkness, the mouth of a spotless cave....

And suddenly the hand in his back pushed firmly. He lost his balance, tipped and plunged. The King of the *Mbe'lmbe* shrieked and reached out for him, but they were both lost in that instant. Hugh fell hard on the spotless floor. As he felt the King's hands on his arms, trying to pull him back, he heard the whirr of oiled hinges and the deafening boom of the oven door sealing shut.

He rose and turned. The King lay weeping on the ground, crumpled by failure and betrayal. Hugh could see the old confectioner, a shadow beyond the tinted glass, something made of smoke. The old man raised his hand to the silver knob by the side of the oven door. Then the glass began to fill with light. It felt to Hugh as if the sun were rising at his back.

He scarcely minded. It was a pleasant warmth, something familiar and almost comforting about it, as if he might melt away with a smile upon his face.

But it was otherwise for the King of the *Mbe'lmbe*. Hugh only slowly realized what he was hearing, and what it meant.

The little man was screaming.

He turned and hammered his fist on the glass, making a rhythmic pounding to which the twisted figure beyond the glass seemed to dance an antic jig. He was certain he saw the top hat tossed high into the air and caught again. The old man was dancing out there.

"Please!" he cried. "Please help! Please, somebody, help him!"

His hands left sticky bubbles on the tempered glass. He could hear the

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isn't Silver either; reborn and renamed, what he retains and what he rejects are entwined: If Loren is smarter than Jane in the ways of the world, Verlis is less wise, more mercurial, and vastly less comprehensible.

It's hard to say more without giving away important parts of the plot, and this, too, is different; the plot and its twists matter more. But if this book is entirely different, it's certainly not a failure, and reading it doesn't destroy what was there before; it is not a kind book, but it's not without power and even hope.

John Scalzi is familiar in a different way. I've never read his fiction, but on the internet, I always read "The Whatever," a blog of longstanding in which Scalzi airs his somewhat direct opinions, some of which clash with mine, and many of which don't. He has a very down-to-earth sense of humor, an endearing hubris, an adorable daughter, and a way with words that is almost entirely without poetry, and never without both humor and truth.

Reading *Old Man's War* presents, therefore, far less risk than Tanith Lee's novel to this reader. Reading his fiction takes nothing away from reading his opinion pieces, and if I'm not moved or amused by it, I lose nothing. From a vantage of having nothing to lose, *Old Man's War* was more than a pleasant surprise.

John Perry is a seventy-five-year-old man, living on the quarantined planet of Earth. Widowed for almost a decade, he's about to fulfill a promise and join the foreign legion. Well, okay, not exactly the foreign legion — ten years ago, both he and his wife signed up for the CDF, the Colonial Defense Forces who protect Earth's fledgling colonies from the depredations of aliens that obviously never watched *Star Trek*. Perry and his wife aren't exactly warmongers; they signed up for practical reasons: only the CDF has the technology necessary to rejuvenate the elderly. They wanted to be young again, and there was only one way to do it: serve ten years in the CDF.

There's no way home; you sign your papers, and you promise never to return to Earth again. When your time of service is up, you can relocate to one of the colonies, but the planet of your birth is strictly forbidden you. Without his wife, Perry doesn't feel that much attachment to home, and he embarks on the path of the warrior. More or less.

There's much about this book

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that's familiar; it's a very old-fashioned sf novel, of a sort I haven't seen in a while. There's not a thing in it that I would call cutting-edge, and there's a certain sense of nostalgia that creeps in when reading the in-dialogue expositions that explain the physics and biology of Scalzi's odd universe; it's probably the least adroitly handled part of the book, but still, nostalgia has its value. And being seventy-five years of age, at least in terms of experience, does make a sizable difference in how you react; there's a lot less insecurity, and a lot less angst. (Thank god.)

There's definitely Scalzi humor laced throughout it, which is to be expected; less expected, a genuine sense of regret, loss, and almost veneration for things that are taken for granted in our daily lives: husbands, wives, friendships. In fact, I would say that in a very, very understated way, Scalzi manages to be completely honest, and his wisecracking Perry is vulnerable in an unapologetic way.

This book made me laugh out loud several times; it made me smile, it made me wince in recognition, and in the end, I left it feeling happier for the experience. I wanted it to be longer. I really did.

* * *

Stephan Zielinski is another first novelist, but unlike the first two books, his novel traverses familiar terrain — in this case San Francisco and environs — and makes it strange. Very, very strange. It's hard to call this a contemporary fantasy...although it is. It's hard to call it anything that isn't its own.

First warning: This book is written entirely in present tense, which some people may find jarring. Second warning: There's no exposition. There's no real concession to the engineering mindset. If you *have* to know how everything works in order to make yourself at home, you're never quite going to feel comfortable in this book. Third warning: In the same way Zielinski makes no nods to the ponderous, he makes no nod to the familiar; if you have to be able to point at a character and describe him in a few succinct words (other than "crazy"), you're not going to find a lot to grab hold of here. He doesn't sit still long enough.

Despite all of that, if you start this book, there's a very good chance you'll be sucked in regardless of whether or not you need the struts. So what do you need to know? There's bad magic in the world, but it doesn't generally affect people who can't see it. Seeing it involves the use of the third eye, which isn't

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impossible — but what you can see can also see you, and that makes things tricky if you're one of what passes for good guys.

Al Rider is a young man with a penchant for magic, an ability to use it — in the odd ways that Zielinski encapsulates magic — and a great desire to show off. His friends — the bickering, almost antisocial crew who often gather at his mess of a home — are part of an organization, a cell in the Opposition that monitors the bad magic, and tries to contain it. Most of the members of cells like this don't last long, and with good reason.

Whitlomb had the pleasure of teaching Al Rider at Miskatonic U; he's the professorial elder statesman of the group. Maggie-Sue makes the word *antisocial* look cozy; she's an elementalist who gets dragged into what passes for the real world by a short dead man, also part of the team. Chloe Lee is a girl with a great third-eye and no discernable ability to protect herself from what she sees; Kristof Arbeiter is a cyclist with a penchant for fighting and shooting; Creedon Theibaud might as well be the psycho Invisible Man. Max Sturgeon is the almost-mundane who's theoretically their leader, and doesn't believe half of their babble, because he's mostly sane.

In all, it's like a geek parade with power thrown into the mix, and the mix shines. Particularly when the going gets tough, dead dogs appear, and cultists — of the less friendly but more crazy variety — are threatening to do a lot more damage than a group of argumentative crazy people want to see happen to their dirty, deranged city.

There's an edge to Zielinski's writing, his spare use of words, his often cutting dialogue and his almost repulsive but nonetheless compelling characters that makes one sit up and take notice. His take-no-prisoners approach demands attention; his black insider humor, his panache, and his sheer break-neck speed reward that attention.

Pay it.

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For several years now, Robert Reed has been our most prolific contributor, averaging more than one story every three issues, so we tend to assume most readers know his basic author bio: he lives in Lincoln, Nebraska, with his wife and young daughter; is the author of such novels as Marrow *and its forthcoming sequel,* The Well of Stars; *has a healthy interest in sports; and thinks in unpredictable ways. But no mention yet has been made of his semiofficial Website. Should you like to see a bibliography of his works or any of a half-dozen interviews with him, point your browser to* http://www.starbaseandromeda.com/reed. *Should you like to read his latest skewed vision of the future, keep reading here.*

Poet Snow

By Robert Reed

FOR YEARS SHE HAD BEEN their neighbor and that was all she was: a quiet, solitary woman with a passion for long walks that took her to every end of their little city. Everyone must have seen her, at least in passing. She looked to be in her thirties, and then her forties — a small skinny creature with long purplish-black hair, smart gray eyes and a Roman nose, with a face handsome enough to catch the notice of a few men but never so pretty that the local women regarded her as a threat. In cold weather, she wore oversized coats and high boots, and there were still plenty of winter months in that northern latitude. This was one of the new cities born during a very warm century — a community that sprang up in the midst of what had been a shaggy spruce forest and peat bogs. One hundred thousand people had migrated from the sultry, overcrowded south, drawn by cheap land and nostalgia for old-fashioned winters. It was an utterly modern city, diverse and clean, aesthetically united, and despite that unity, surprisingly lovely. The woman lived near the city's largest park, alone inside a tiny house. Yet her yard covered several

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hectares of rocky ground, and unlike almost every landowner, she had maintained the original spruce forest. That fact alone made her notable. People might not know who the walker was, but everybody understood what was meant when they heard the "Christmas tree place" mentioned — a dark blue-green woods surrounded by a simple split-rail fence, both the house and its occupant left invisible from every outside vantage point.

Her immediate neighbors knew a good deal more, of course. They saw her with some frequency, and over the years, they had managed more than a few conversations with the woman. Given the chance, she was nothing but pleasant. She could smile and make small talk, and if pressed, she relinquished little clues about herself. Her name was Brenda Liles, for instance, and she was an artist. Just what sort of artist remained a mystery. People eventually settled on the term "poet." Ms. Liles had used that word, or she hadn't dissuaded anyone who used it in her presence. But unlike several other local poets, she wasn't a teacher at the city college, nor did anyone seem to know the titles of her work or even under what name she wrote. Some speculated that she was just a strange woman wearing the arts as a kind of camouflage. But then her next-door neighbor managed to learn something incredible. The woman was indeed a poet, yes. But she didn't work with prosaic, old-fashioned words. And since childhood, nothing that she had written had actually enjoyed the honor of being published.

Ms. Liles's neighbor was an elderly woman originally from Haiti and then Orlando. Ruby was outgoing and persistent, and in some cases, relentless. Learning a little bit about Brenda, she wanted to know everything. One summer day, using the excuse of searching for a lost cat — a nonexistent cat, as it happened — the old woman was able to enter the property and find the poet in an unusually talkative mood. The two women stood in a little clearing in the middle of the spruce woods. Above them was an adjustable screen that absorbed the worst of the sun's heat, using that cheap energy to refrigerate the air below. Otherwise the spruce trees would bake and die. Brenda explained the technology with words that no typical poet would have used — soulless words about photons and microclimates and cool-weather photosynthesis — and then with a fondness bridging on true love, she admitted, "These are my favorite trees. The spruces are always the last trees to die before the cold takes all."

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What a very peculiar creature, Ruby thought to herself.

Then she brushed aside her unease. Poets were odd people, by definition, and with that in mind, she summoned up a big smile while asking, "Are you working on something now?"

The gray eyes widened. Amused, the poet said, "Always."

The old woman nearly asked, "What is it?" But then she thought better, forcing herself into a patient silence.

The ploy worked.

Suddenly the artist couldn't stop herself. Years of hard, self-abusive labor emerged as a few decidedly unpoetic sentences. She said, "I'm using nanotechnological techniques to write an epic poem on an impermanent substrate. For now, my work exists in a computer. But later I'll use ice as my medium. Or more to the point, I'll use snow."

"Snow?" the neighbor muttered.

Hearing the word spoken by another made the poet smile. And then, answering a question that her audience would never think of asking, she remarked, "Life is impermanent, just as art is impermanent. So why not gladly embrace the temporary?"

Now what in hell did that mean?

It was a question that might have been asked, but wasn't. Not by a busybody like the old cat-less woman, nor by anyone she spoke to in those next few weeks and months. But at least there was some hint as to what the poet was doing. Her immediate neighbors were amused, and perhaps a few were curious. But the curiosity passed, and through the next winter and spring and into the long northern summer, Brenda Liles was again little more than a familiar figure marching through town, her aging face looking more distracted every day. More focused, and more passionate. Then summer was over, and the distractions seemed to pass. Suddenly she was smiling as she walked, speaking softly to nobody, using a quiet purposeful voice that instantly threw her sanity into question.

That autumn, the local news monopoly received a holo brochure as well as a handwritten note. The note was from a nanoindustrialist with a taste for the arts. "She is one of yours," he wrote in a crimped, inartistic script. "Perhaps you would like to do a profile, before the event."

The "event" was the subject of the elaborate brochure.

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Calls were made to the sponsoring foundation, confirming the basics of the story. More calls were made to Brenda Liles, and then digital pleadings, and finally, a handwritten card signed by reporters, on-camera talent, and several frustrated editors. "We would love to do a story about you," the card claimed. "At your convenience, naturally." But for weeks, the plea went unanswered. The story was nearly forgotten. And then on a chill day in November, the poet strolled into the main studio, wearing a long brown coat past its prime and tall dirty boots, her face looking exhausted but composed. "Now is convenient," she announced. "If you want this interview, let's do it now."

By the next day, the poet moved from a recognized if imprecise presence to become the most famous citizen in the little city.

"I earned this commission twenty years ago," she explained. "But the scope of my work and the necessary technologies...well, there've been some long delays and large technical problems. Not to mention the simple old-fashioned difficulties in writing the bastard poem itself."

It surprised some. But poets can have a genuine potty mouth.

"You'll be writing in the snow," the interviewer mentioned, referring to the brochure glowing on his lap. "Is that what will happen — ?"

"I'm writing with the snow," she corrected.

Then she grabbed the brochure away from him, turning to a chapter near the bottom of its memory. "Each flake is a word," she explained. "Each word is written in a language of my own invention." She spoke in deep mathematical terms, and then without warning, she boasted, "There aren't a hundred people in the world who could read this work. And of them, I doubt if five will understand any of it."

The interviewer stared at his very odd subject. He came close to asking, "Why bother, then?"

But the poet continued talking, happily explaining how the complete poem would be one thousand and three words long, and due to the vagaries of the atmosphere and the chaotic drift of snowflakes, the essential flakes would assemble themselves in the correct order, in the required set of lines, only five or six times on the entire canvas.

"The canvas," the interviewer repeated.

Then to help guide his audience, he said, "You mean us."

She said, "Yes," with an "isn't it obvious?" tone.

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"This snow...this event...it's going to cover our town sometime in January. Is that the plan?"

"Unless there are delays, yes."

It was a foolish and laughable and utterly bizarre activity. But there was more to the story. Nodding, the interviewer mentioned, "This will be a major event, as I understand it. Much of the art world will be watching us."

"The entire world will be watching." She was an artist and a performer, and on the eve of her first show, she shivered with anticipation. "Yes, this will be an event. A spectacle. Like nothing else before, and afterward, this tiny town will be nothing but famous."

THE JANUARY DATE proved too optimistic. Key hardware was late in arriving, and one of the AI climate moderators proved to be lazy, clumsy, and generally incompetent for its job. There was talk that the snow would have to wait until next winter — a small shame, and how would Brenda absorb this disappointment? But she didn't appear sad or even worried. That was the consensus derived from hundreds of sightings and dozens of casual conversations. The poet seemed calm and perhaps even happy, and she acted more willing than usual to carry her side of any conversation. January would have been ideal, she admitted. As spring approached, bringing the first waves of southern heat, her snow would prove more temporary than ever. But that was all right. She wanted to show the world how fragile genius and its art forms were, and that wouldn't change. The middle of February was her working goal, and the goal held until a random ten-centimeter snow fell three days before the event — in effect, spoiling her canvas.

Brenda and the city had to wait for the wild snow to melt.

Winter was nearly done when it was announced that tomorrow was the day. Brenda was seen on the news making final preparations, while the local meteorologists spoke with familiar phrases and minimal knowledge, explaining how the next twenty-four hours would play out.

Snow required cold, obviously.

And moisture.

And in the upper atmosphere, a multitude of delicate events had to

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transpire in the perfect order, if the specially designed snowflakes were to form in the proper fashion before falling with the most effective velocity.

Overnight, an enormous dome was erected over the city and the surrounding countryside. It was invisible and extraordinarily durable — an elaborate hemisphere of ionized particles and nano-platforms, light-eating solar motes and state-of-the-art refrigerating smokes. The early March sunlight was diminished, and much of that blocked energy helped power the feedback systems that deepened the resident chill. There was enough moisture under the dome to build a five-centimeter snowfall, but that wouldn't be ample. The poet had originally proposed a damp snow of twelve centimeters — a very pretty old-fashioned snow, she had promised, augmented by the city's own water supplies — and that's what the various press releases had repeated. But in January, and twice in February, Brenda had quietly increased her projected totals. When asked about the changes, she claimed that twenty-four centimeters was aesthetically sweeter, and she was trying to ensure that the spring heat wouldn't erase her work in a single day, and of course with a bigger snow, she was making it easier to find examples of her poetry hidden inside this wondrous event.

Her neighbors didn't particularly care. The artistic heart of this project had always seemed contrived and foolish, not to mention brilliant in all the worst ways. What they appreciated was the attention from the worldwide artistic networks. What they enjoyed were those moments when savants and warhols were quoted as saying, "This is a great moment for giant art. Not since Addal built the fluorescent ink paintings off Hawaii have we had such a meaningful vision of truth and grandeur...." What people liked best were the video calls from the media and every kind of stranger — people around the world and the moon asking Brenda's neighbors, "What do you think about what's happening? What will you do while it snows? And how can you even relate to a mind like Ms. Liles's?"

Every system was set and operating within the permitted norms. The dome had been erected without incident, casting a convincing twilight over the city, and the chilly March air fell back into full winter. As promised, the snow began on a Friday evening, and it was steady and heavy, and from the beginning, it was wet enough to roll into balls and men. But except for a few vandalistic children, everyone was careful not to disturb what was happening outside the windows. They watched the

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centimeters collect, and they made digital records for themselves, and in the local holorooms, they celebrated this silent and pretty and utterly harmless event. It was art at its silliest, but if adults couldn't be silly now and then, what was the point in being alive?

At some point on Saturday, in the middle of the day, the poet posted new estimates about snow totals. Due to vagaries in moisture contents and the extra effectiveness of the cooling dome, thirty centimeters were likely, while the area near her home would reach forty, or perhaps even half a meter.

Hardly worth the worry, and certainly requiring no panic.

But what concerned some were larger events happening elsewhere. A surge of warm spring air was heading north, ready to collide on Sunday with the great pool of dark chilled air. And more important were the rainboys. Giant lighter-than-air craft used to bring artificial clouds into dry areas, the rainboys had started flying in the spring, gathering up fat white masses of damp air over the oceans, compressing them and impressing them with electrical charges, using the same essential equipment that built the cold dome in order to move moisture to tens of thousands of corporate tree farms and fish farms and steak farms and farm farms. Every year saw problems. One or two rainboys might fail in the same week, and it was possible that several might suffer troubles in the same month. But not in the same day, and it seemed like an incredible coincidence when three rainboys moving three closely spaced clouds failed together, almost in the same minute. Each failure was distinct, and later investigations were less than clear-cut about the causes. Maybe it was just lousy luck. But whatever the reason, each cloud fell apart at its margins, bleeding its moisture into the warm spring air pushing north with a force and majesty that wouldn't stop until it reached the Arctic.

The old half-meter estimates of snowfall vanished before Sunday was half-finished. Sitting indoors, inside modest modern homes, people learned that in the next three days, if the models could be believed, the snows would approach a depth of five meters, or six. Unless the worst-case scenarios proved true, in which case as much as ten meters of wet cold smothering snow would plunge down on their heads.

"The entire world will be watching," Brenda had promised months ago.

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Those words were remembered and chewed upon and discussed and denied. But then it was Monday and the snow was already deeper than any person was tall, and the sun was up but invisible, while the cooling dome was refusing to dissipate, and inside forty thousand homes, quiet voices said, "She meant this to happen."

To one another, and to themselves, people said, "This is what our neighbor had in mind from the beginning."

N HER OWN initiative, Ruby fabricated a holo-room that would admit only those living close at hand. Then she invited her neighbors to a Monday evening meeting. Almost everybody showed; where else did they have to be? But not Brenda. Since yesterday morning, the poet had steadfastly refused every one of their phone calls and e-mails, the same as she was ignoring the interview requests from every media outlet. Yet she remained inside her house. She had to. The dome was highest above her spruce woods, and the storm was squarely focused on her.

"This is a willful and enormous mess," Ruby said, her voice tight and excited and very much scared. "What we need to do is decide what we're going to do. About Brenda, and about everything else, too."

Maybe a hundred homes were represented. People who hadn't looked at each other twice in the last year were now sitting inside the illusionary room, speaking with quick careful voices, and listening too. They were every sort of person — professionals and investment-riders, retirees and tradespeople. Most were physically fit, and many enjoyed the winter sports, their basements and garages full of the very best equipment available from a modern sporting goods department. A small fleet of snowbuggies stood at the ready, and smart-skis for everyone, plus snow-shoes and self-heating clothes, shovels and snow-throwing machines, as well as a small hill's worth of salt. Power wasn't a worry; every house had its own fuel cell generator. But the crushing, smothering weight of the snow scared everybody. What was essential had to be done first, and not everyone had the tools and backbone to help. Teams were created. Strong men and determined women dressed for the Arctic and stepped out into the impossible snow. GPS monitors let them navigate. They gathered what they could of their machinery and each other, and then working fast

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and hard, one house at a time, the teams stripped the worst of the snow off the groaning roofs.

By Tuesday morning, another two meters had fallen. But the houses were safe, at least for the time being.

People rested until noon, eating like lumberjacks and managing little naps. Then the second part of the operation began. Dozens gathered at one of the main intersections — faceless, almost shapeless bodies wearing masks and stiff coats and heavy trousers and boots already half-filled with packed wet snow. Snowshoes were mandatory. Otherwise, their bodies would sink to the crotch, if not deeper. Only the voices betrayed who was who. One voice was easily recognized, asking everyone else, "Are we all here?"

It was the old woman. Half a dozen burly men said, "You shouldn't be here, Ruby. What are you trying to do to yourself?"

"First of all, this was my idea," she reminded them. "And second, the poet is my neighbor. How can I be anywhere else?"

The sharp tone cut off any arguments. Besides, there wasn't time to spare. They had to do this hard thing as quickly as possible, and they had to leave themselves with enough energy and focus to return home afterward, then again, somehow scrape their roofs clean.

"All right," their ringleader declared, waving a heavy mitten. "Let's do this!"

The landscape had been made frighteningly simple, flat and gray-white and barely lit. Almost every landmark had been obscured, and new waves of snow were crashing down on them, choking off vision and muting every sound. At some ill-defined place, the group left the street behind. But no one was sure where that happened or where they had shuffled over the buried split-rail fence. Then the snow sprouted mounds and pillars and neat little pyramids. Under each was a spruce tree, its blue-green boughs twisted and smashed by the relentless mass, while draped over the half-crushed trees were the shreds of the canopy that had always kept the woods cool in summer, and safe.

The smallest men broke the trail for the others. A two-hundred-meter walk absorbed most of an hour. Then the trees were behind them, and the little house revealed itself as a position on the GPS monitors and what looked like a small, very tidy igloo. The first shovel cut deep, finding snow

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beneath the snow. They formed into a rough circle and began digging with hand shovels and mittens, and after forty minutes of intense labor, they had excavated a good-sized pit. Still, there wasn't any roof. A few mentioned what everyone was thinking, that the house had already collapsed under the full brunt of the storm. Regardless, work came to a standstill as everyone gasped and shook their aching arms, ate trail mix and drank from water bottles kept warm under their coats. A few listened to the news on satellite radio. This freak storm and their personal plight was the most important story in the world today. An army of soldiers and civilian workers was being mobilized on the edges of the disaster, but it might be too late. Every distant voice agreed that thousands of lives were in jeopardy, while pundits and legislators tried to outdo each other, describing the kinds of vengeance that would be necessary for a crime of these titanic proportions.

The radios were silenced.

Again, shovels were jabbed into the snow, and two minutes later, the blue-black solar tiles on the intact roof burst into view.

A pair of diamond-bladed saws started to whine and slice.

When the hole was large enough, a limber young man slipped into the dark attic. With a flashlight and some considerable experience in construction, he examined the trusses and floorboards. Then he popped back into view, shouting, "It's pretty close to busting, I think."

"Can you hear anybody?" Ruby asked.

"I don't hear much," he confessed. "Except the groaning boards, that is."

The hole was widened. Saws and more tools were passed down, and then a woman and second man scrambled in after the first man. But they forgot the rope — a buckytube thread wrapped in nylon, suitable for a thousand different jobs. Ruby grabbed it up, and she slid into the attic with a spryness that startled everyone, including herself.

"You need me," she told the anonymous masked figures. Fiercely, she said, "I'm the only who's ever been inside this house."

A lie, but nobody dared call her on it.

They walked the length of the attic, feeling the house shake and moan around them. A fold-out ladder and hatch lay under the insulating aerogel. A simple latch was easily broken, and they climbed down to a darkened

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hallway. No one was home, it seemed. They searched both bedrooms and the kitchen and the little living room, and finally, they found the stairs leading into the basement.

A ruddy light burned somewhere below.

The larger man went first, one hand holding a fire ax. Reaching the bottom of the stairs, he paused and blinked, and a moment later, as the wailing scream began, he dropped the ax, missing his own foot by nothing.

A woman was screaming out in the gloom.

The man cursed and grabbed up the ax again, holding it in a vaguely defensive stance.

The scream became a choked little voice, and the voice chanted, "No, no, no, please."

Ruby stepped past everyone. The basement was an elaborate workroom filled with bottled AIs and other simulation tools. She crossed it in a few strides, the rope still coiled in her hands, ready for every job. You could never tell when you might need to tie something up or secure it from falling. That's why she had brought the rope, and that's why she forgot about it now. She was staring at the poet, marveling at how tiny the woman seemed when she was lying on the floor, in a fetal pose, milky hands thrown over a face ripped by anguish and terror. "Just don't make me suffer too much," Brenda begged. "Have mercy. Kill the artist, but please...don't make it hurt too much...."

The old woman stopped short, stunned now.

Unknown to the intruders, half a dozen cameras were focused on them, piping images to Brenda's official holoroom. Two worlds were watching as Ruby stood above her neighbor. And then, finally, the wise old woman began to understand what this was about.

She laughed, abruptly and with great sadness.

What else could she do?

Ruby giggled and sobbed and knelt on creaky knees. "This never had anything to do with poetry in the snow," she told Brenda. "That was just a convenient disguise, wasn't it? What you're doing here...it's some kind of foolish, contrived performance art...isn't that it...?"

Her neighbor squirmed on the floor.

"The fragility of art and genius. Is that what you hoped to show here?"

Brenda gazed through her spidery fingers.

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"Oh, you poor darling." Ruby dropped the rope and offered both hands, adding, "I feel so sorry for you, you know."

"Don't you want to kill me?" Brenda asked. And then with an almost sorry tone, she added, "I'm attacking your city, your homes. I am a goddess with a cold rage. The Witch of Winter and Despair. Why even come here, if it wasn't to murder me?"

Everybody was laughing now.

"Honey," the old woman purred, a gray-black hand coming out of its mitten, touching the sharp white cheek. "You are very strange and probably mentally ill, and you aren't much of a poet, either. But really, even together, those still aren't good enough reasons to kill anybody."

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Yoon Ha Lee has contributed a handful of fantasy and sf stories to our pages, including "Counting the Shapes" and "Echoes Down an Endless Hall." For the last year or two, the bulk of her creative efforts have been devoted to her young daughter, Arabelle, who at fourteen months seems to be trying to teach her parents ancient Hittite (with little success). Somehow Ms. Lee has found time recently to serve as an editor for The Internet Review of Science Fiction *and to contribute poetry and fiction to* Strange Horizons *and* Lenox Avenue. *Her new story for us is a quietly elegant fantasy.*

Eating Hearts

By Yoon Ha Lee

THEY TELL MANY STORIES in that land surrounded on three sides by ocean, sometimes of foxes with small sharp smiles, sometimes of rats wearing men's clothing. They tell stories of the magician whose tomb was found empty after his death and of bones that beg for proper burial. Sometimes they speak of their first human king, a son of heaven, and his mother, a bear who had become human by meditating in the deepest and most dreadful of caves.

If they mention the bear's companion, it is to describe her pacing in the darkness, unable to sit still, then running out of the cave in shame, unable to become human.

"It's about *not* seeing," Chuan explained to her just after he brought the meal to the table. "The perfect magician is all-blind, all-unknowing. No sound reaches a wall to wake an echo; no touch bridges distance." He leaned back against the wall where, Horanga imagined, the cloth of his shirt hung over the hollow curve of his back. He lived in a house in the

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city, by the river, and long ago the sound of fish swimming endlessly in that river would have distracted her from her purpose.

"Then what do you do in this house?" asked Horanga, looking not at his face or his hands, but at the plate between them. The plate was heaped with tender vegetables, slivers of rare meat, and sliced nuts; over the vegetables and meat and nuts, he had drizzled three different sauces in a tapestry of taste.

"A *perfect* magician, I said." He smiled.

It was important to understand exactly what Chuan, this latest maker of magic, said to her. To do that, Horanga had to ask insolent questions, which was easy because a woman who came alone to a man's house had no pretense of virtue. She had walked away from her mother's family long ago to seek magic, and since no one in her mother's family would acknowledge her, she sought the more interesting thing: magicians. She was a striking woman, tall like a tree in the moment before wind and snow bring it down, and she had long loose hair and lips on the verge of promises.

Magicians were permitted their eccentricities and their dalliances. So Chuan had bought her new shoes, although she needed them not, and a new umbrella besides, and put a purse of his own coins into her hand, and invited her into his house. An old bargain.

Horanga looked back up at Chuan's face by way of his poised hand and the lines of his arm. She had tasted delicacies from every province, and she understood the importance of this moment. As they ate, the two of them, neither looked away from the other. And as they set down their chopsticks after the last mouthful, Chuan said, "I am, of course, far from being a perfect magician."

This disappointed her. "And why is that?" She knew the coquette's art of gazing down and to the side, of the hesitant touch, and disdained to use it. Such gestures belonged to younger women first of all and to women with shallower purposes most of all. A forthright gaze suited her better.

"The near-perfect magician," he said, "desires a single thing only, when desire he must. He desires it so perfectly that nothing else exists, and this is the root that nourishes his magic-making. At other times, in other places, he may live as ordinary men do. But magic with nothing to distract it from its purpose — that is what he shapes."

"So a perfect magician desires nothing," said Horanga, who believed

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in stating things plainly. "And everything becomes possible as a solution to the desire he does not have."

"That is it," said Chuan, and his sober tone pleased her. She had spoken with many a magician in her travels, and not all of them had taken her seriously. "You must have a philosophical turn of mind, to grasp it so quickly. Was it to learn magic that you came here?"

"No," said Horanga with perfect honesty, and her gaze moved to the plates whence they had sated themselves. It was her turn to smile, and she averted her gaze to avoid alarming the man with what was in her eyes. "I am not interested in magic so much as I am interested in magicians."

She spoke of a category rather than a particular, but he understood her well enough.

ONCE, A TIGER WATCHED outside a window, yearning after human skin and human manners, but knew no means of obtaining them except by eating human hearts.

During the night, when half the moon hung low in the sky and its other half shone in fragments from the city's great river, Horanga said to the man beneath her, "For the desire that consumes your heart, O magician, what would you do?"

Other men had answered this question amid silks, or satins, or furs. She was offended by furs, though she should not be. In any case, they had said the expected thing to a woman above them. Chuan pleased her by saying, albeit in a teasing, dream-laden voice, "Other than this? I might walk blindfolded during the darkest hours, with no star overhead, no path underfoot."

It always came back to darkness above all other forms of deprivation. "Would you go into a cave, a place where no light has ever lived, and no wind has ever blown, and even the water has forgotten its wellspring?"

Chuan reached up to stroke a lock of her hair that would otherwise have fallen upon his face. "A perfect magician would see no need, having mastered all distraction. He would also see no reason why not. But a near-perfect magician — why, yes."

"Into a cave while you have only the scantest of provisions to sustain

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you, and only a trickle of water?" Her voice grew lower, deeper, descending.

"Yes," he breathed, letting go of her hair.

"Into a cave with no space to lie down, and scarcely enough room to turn around and around?"

"Yes," he said again.

"Into a cave where the seasons blur into one long languid chill, and nothing varies but the speed of your pulse?"

"Yes."

A TIGER CAN ONLY EAT so many hearts before they start to taste bitter, then sour, then like nothing at all. By that point, even a tiger's own heart, that rarest of delicacies, loses all savor.

Our tiger, who once watched outside windows, is not incapable of learning this.

Toward morning, when languor had fallen upon them and words returned, Chuan asked his own question. "You only ask about reasons to go into the cave and to stay there. Why not reasons to leave it?"

"You are here, and not in a cave. I should think that the question answers itself."

"And so it does," said the far-from-perfect magician. "How many hearts have you eaten, my dear?"

"Too many," she said, indifferent to numbers, but honest in essence.

"Were they all magicians' hearts?"

"Only later," Horanga said, unsurprised by his astuteness. He was a magician, after all.

"If you are waiting for a perfect magician," Chuan said, "you are looking for the wrong thing. You have a mantle of hair wholly black and you walk upon two legs. You did the better thing by refusing to let the cave consume you, long ago. You wanted to be something other than virtuous, which is to say, you wanted freedom. And you have it, which is one thing more than the mother of that long-ago king ever had."

"It is kind of you to say so," Horanga murmured. "But only humans become perfect magicians through their desire, because they need not

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become human first. I have discovered no way to eat hearts, of magicians or otherwise, while leaving them intact. I am willing to be enlightened if it does not require sitting still in meditation to find out."

"Nonsense," said Chuan, and took her hand, which had strong, slender fingers and fingernails that were merely fingernails. "About eating hearts, I mean."

Horanga gazed at him in astonishment.

"I have spent this last night demonstrating how to consume a heart while leaving it intact, as have you," said Chuan. "And it seemed to me that you were quite awake for it. Or do you, in the perfection of your desire, have no heart left for me to consume?"

They tell many stories in that land surrounded on three sides by ocean, sometimes of foxes with small sharp smiles, sometimes of rats wearing men's clothing. They tell stories of the magician whose tomb was found empty after his death and of bones that beg for proper burial. Sometimes they speak of their first human king, a son of heaven, and his mother, a bear who had become human by meditating in the deepest and most dreadful of caves.

If they mention the bear's companion, it is to describe her pacing in the darkness, unable to sit still, then running out of the cave in shame, unable to become human.

But the children of tigers, who are sometimes also the children of men, tell a different story.

—For the tigers in my family.

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David Gerrold is best known for his many science fiction novels, including The Martian Child, The Man Who Folded Himself, *the Chtorr series, and the Star Wolf books. His latest story ventures into the realm of nightmares with a contemporary tale that might not win the ASPCA's seal of approval, but which won't soon be forgotten.*

Chester

By David Gerrold

AFTER THE ACCIDENT, Annie was all I had left. She had a limp, she had a scar down the right side of her face that her hair couldn't quite cover, and sometimes she had a look in her eyes that worried me — not quite frightened, resigned.

Six-year-old girls were supposed to be happy spring butterflies, bouncing from one bright-colored moment to the next. But the giggles of the season were silent. Annie sat alone in her room, holding her doll, the one with the smashed face, and stared at the wall. Not even out the window.

The doctors said she needed time, that was all. She'd been through a lot, and she still missed her mother — but she'd come back to life eventually. When she was ready.

But nobody's ever ready for anything. I knew that. I wasn't ready to be a widower at thirty-three.

I sat down next to Annie and put my arm around her shoulders. She didn't resist, but neither did she relax. She let me pull her close, but she was still a little zombie. I leaned over and sniffed her hair, kissed the top

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of her head, and whispered into her ear, "Have I told you today how much I love you?" She didn't respond.

Out of frustration, as much as anything else, I scooped her up and held her on my lap, hugged her close. "You're my favorite kid in the whole wide world and that's never going to change." I stroked her hair. "Listen to me, sweetheart. I know it hurts. I miss her too. But maybe we can help each other. You know how I come in here and talk to you about what I'm feeling? Well, maybe sometimes if you wanted to talk to me, maybe you could do that and maybe that would help a little bit. What do you think?"

Not even a nod. I knew she heard me, but when she got like this, she seemed unreachable. Words like traumatized and catatonic and withdrawn all flashed through my head, but I hated those words — because the way that people used them, they stopped being descriptions, they became explanations. They turned into life sentences.

"Okay, sweetheart, I'm not going to force you. When you're ready, you come see me, okay? Just say 'okay.' Okay?"

"Okay," she whispered. And that was enough. Not quite a breakthrough, but certainly the possibility of one.

"I'm going to go make dinner now. Let's have something special. Just for us. What would you like? I'll make your favorite."

"Pancakes."

"Pancakes for dinner? Okay, that sounds fun. And bacon too? Will you come help?"

In this case, help meant sitting silently on her chair while I flipped pancakes on the griddle. When I put the plate in front of her, she made no move to eat. "Didn't I do them right?"

"Daddy, I'm scared."

"Of my pancakes?"

"No. Don't be *silly*."

"Okay." At least she was talking. "What *are* you scared of?"

"Going to sleep."

"Going to sleep?"

"I'm afraid...I won't wake up."

My first instinct was to say, "That's silly. Everybody wakes up." But I stopped myself in time, because that wasn't true. We both knew that. So instead, I just nodded knowingly. "Yeah, that is scary." I had a dozen

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questions I wanted to ask, but I didn't want to push too hard. It was more important that she knew it was safe to talk.

I reached over and began cutting her pancakes for her. She could do it, but before the accident she had always asked me to. She used to say "I like the way you do it, Daddy." But today, she pushed my hands away and said, "I'll do it myself."

"Okay." I sat down opposite her and busied myself with my own plate. I wasn't very hungry, but I went through the motions anyway, waiting for her to go on.

"There's this thing in my dream," she said very matter-of-factly.

"What kind of thing?"

"I don't know. It's too dark and fuzzy to see. It's all flickery. It comes from *underneath*."

"Underneath?"

"Uh-uh. *Underneath*."

"Underneath what?"

"Underneath *everything*."

"Okay. What does it do?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" Very carefully, not wanting to put her off, I said, "I don't know, Annie. That doesn't sound very scary to me."

"Well, it is."

"Why?"

"Because it's *there*." She pushed a piece of pancake around on her plate, mopping up syrup. She still hadn't eaten a bite. "It's even there in the daytime. Only I can't see it, because it's always behind me."

"Now, *that* sounds scary."

"It is."

"Mmm," I said. "We're definitely going to have to do something about this."

"You can't."

"I can't?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because it's from *underneath*."

"I see. That is serious. Tell me, who's bigger? You or it?"

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She didn't answer.

"I'll bet I'm bigger...."

Still no reply.

"Well, certainly the two of us together are big enough."

This wasn't going anywhere. I'd have to try something else. How do you fight magical thinking? *With stronger magic.*

"I know what'll work."

She looked up at me. "What?"

"A dreamcatcher."

"What's a dreamcatcher?"

"Just what it sounds like. Take a bite of that pancake and I'll tell you more."

She did and I did. I didn't remember everything, so I made up what I didn't know. "A dreamcatcher is like a net for your dreams. You hang it over your bed and it catches all your bad dreams. Like a spaghetti strainer. And when it's full, you throw it out and make a new one."

Annie looked skeptical.

"It's an old Indian trick. I learned it from an old Indian. We'll make a dreamcatcher as soon as you finish dinner. We'll need some yarn and some feathers and maybe some sequins too. We'll look in Mommy's sewing box — " Oops. For a moment, she was almost interested, but as soon as I said *Mommy*, Annie shut down again. If only I hadn't opened my big mouth. If only.

If only I hadn't tried to make the light —

I got up and went to the sink. I started scrubbing the griddle in fast ferocious movements, furious at myself for having a big mouth, for being stupid, for everything.

"That's okay, Daddy. We can still do it. Mommy won't mind."

I stopped myself. I nodded curtly. Maybe Annie wasn't the only one who needed strong magic.

Annie picked out her favorite colors of yarn, and I found some dowels in the garage, left over from my kite-building period. We tied three of the dowels together to make a triangle, then strung a clumsy webwork of braided yarn and plastic beads across the center. We pulled bright-colored feathers out of Mommy's Halloween boa, it was always shedding anyway, and tied them in rainbow blossoms to each corner. We hung more feathers

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and beads from the bottom. Then we said some magic words over it and hung it on the wall over Annie's bed. "There. That'll catch all your bad dreams. Or my name isn't Mortimer Chuzzlefinger."

"Da-addy!" I hadn't heard that pronunciation in a while, with all the extra syllables. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed it.

"Oh, I forgot. My name *isn't* Mortimer Chuzzlefinger. But don't worry about it. This will still catch all your bad dreams. Snout's Honor. Now go brush your teeth and put on your nightie."

Annie went without argument. She didn't bounce, she limped. She had turned into a serious little soul. I missed my little girl, the one who giggled. I wondered if I'd ever hear her laugh again. I tucked her into bed and hugged her tightly. She accepted it, she even hugged back, but there was still something missing.

The difference between human beings and coyotes is that when the Acme Rocket-Launcher blows up in the coyote's face, he doesn't lose heart. He just goes back to the Acme catalog and orders something else. Human beings never recover from that first awful explosion. We might not walk around with our hair sticking out in charred frizzles and a scorched look of stunned amazement, but we never really regain our trust in a safe and orderly universe either. Once suspicious, we remain suspicious. That's what murders childhood innocence.

I looked in on Annie several times that night. She appeared to be sleeping soundly. The dreamcatcher was on the wall over her headboard where we'd carefully hung it. When she was little, I used to sit and watch her sleep, amazed that any little human being could be so beautiful, even more amazed that I could be so totally committed to protecting her from harm. I'd always thought of myself as self-involved to the point of selfishness, but having Annie in my life showed me otherwise. All I could think about was her smile, the trusting way she slipped her hand into mine, the giggles and laughter. Everything else was...just stuff. I finally went to bed, hopeful that maybe the dreamcatcher was a way to start again.

But early the next morning, even before the sun was up, she came to me crying. "Daddy, the dreamcatcher didn't work — "

I followed her back to her room, where she pointed at the wall. Our carefully constructed webwork had been shredded. The dowels were

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broken and the netting we'd strung had been pulled apart. For a moment, I had the distinct impression that something had fought its way out. I started to say, "Why did you break it — ?" then stopped myself. This wasn't the time for accusations. I scooped her up instead, hugged her, stroked her hair, and whispered, "Wow. That was some bad dream. We're going to need a bigger dreamcatcher." She just held on tight and wouldn't look.

Later, after she was dressed, after she had gone outside to sit under the tree to talk with her stuffed penguin, I took the shredded construction off the wall and examined it. The feathers we'd tied to the corners were all chewed, but not soggy-chewed like a child might do — ragged-chewed as if by the teeth of rats. The dowels too had the same tiny teeth marks. The yarn we'd tied and strung to make a dream-net had been stretched and pulled apart. And for a moment, I wondered if this might be something more than just a child's bad dreams. I even pulled her bed away from the wall and went looking for holes in the baseboard. Nothing. Nothing at all.

I tossed the shredded dreamcatcher into the trash, where Annie wouldn't see it, and wondered if I should make another one. But why would Annie rip it apart? Some deeper, darker thing we hadn't gotten to yet? All I could do was guess.

After a while, I went out to the garage. We had three old tennis rackets that we'd bought at a yard sale for five dollars. I had some metal rods and some nylon fishing line, an old bicycle wheel, and even some piano wire. I could make an industrial strength dreamcatcher, one she couldn't destroy. Maybe I could show her that Daddy was still bigger and stronger than the worst bad dreams she could imagine. That might work.

With the garage door open, I could keep an eye on her while I worked. I started with the three tennis rackets. I used the piano wire to tie them together, with their heads at the center and the handles sticking out at angles, and sprayed the whole affair with shiny black enamel. After they dried, I attached this construction to the bicycle wheel. Now it needed some decoration.

I found what was left of an old kite, a nine-foot-long strip of silver mylar that rippled in the sun; I cut it into ribbons, twisted the ribbons into twirls and wound it around the rim and the spokes of the bicycle wheel. I burrowed into the Christmas decorations and found a box of tinsel and

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another box of silvery snowflake ornaments. I stapled the tinsel to the handles of the tennis rackets, and attached the snowflakes to the nylon webbing at the sweet spot. When I was done, the whole thing was a pretty ghastly affair — but enormously sturdy; you could carry a bowling ball on it. It was a very serious-looking dreamcatcher.

When I called Annie to the garage to see the new dreamcatcher, she stared at it with an appraiser's eye. Finally, she said, "Okay." But it wasn't a signal of affirmation, it was an "okay" of resignation. Yesterday, she had been hopeful, willing to believe. After last night, she was neither.

All right, I had to think about this. Building the second dreamcatcher had been useful. It was something to do with my hands, something to distract me while my subconscious chewed over the real problem — Annie's belief that there was something underneath that wanted to get to her. I remembered the chapters about "magical thinking." Annie needed to believe in something stronger. We all did. That was the essential part of being human. So after dinner, we hung up the dreamcatcher and lit a pink candle and waved feather dusters at it and said some magical words — "By the power of Great Ghu, the God of the Ceiling, let this dreamcatcher be a barrier to all and everything that wishes harm to this household and all who live here." — but Annie's dispirited "okay" reduced the whole thing to a silly performance. If she didn't believe, it wouldn't work. She was at that age where children start to give up belief. So who knew?

"Daddy?"

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"Will you sleep with me tonight? Mommy always slept with me when I had bad dreams."

I hesitated — remembering everything Dear Abby always said about parents sleeping with children — but this was Annie and this was serious medicine, so I said, "Of course, I will."

I tucked her in carefully, then lay down next to her on top of the covers. She snuggled up next to me, pressing her back against my side. She was asleep almost immediately. That was a relief; neither one of us had been sleeping all that well. Not since the accident. The endless cycling of memory had become a chronic pummeling. There was no peace. The slightest noise or irritation and I'd be up. The one person I most needed to talk to was the person who wasn't here. Maybe that was what Annie was

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feeling. But for just this little moment, maybe we could almost pretend that everything was going to be all right. Except I knew better.

The limp, the scar — when Annie was a teenager, these would be almost impenetrable barriers between her and everybody else. These things would set her apart from the world of normal girls. Girls used gossip and manipulation for bullying — little games when they were little, horrendous games when they grew bigger. Sometimes, in the way they interacted, you could see them training to be future harpies, honing the pernicious skills of ripping out the hearts of the innocent. Annie was already self-conscious about her wounds; her teen years would be hell. I'd asked about cosmetic surgery, physical therapy, orthopedic repair, but the doctors said there wasn't a lot they could do now, maybe later. But later might be too late. Her spirit was crippled too.

Eventually, I fell into an uneasy sleep, a swirl of disturbing dreams. Urgent dreams. I had to hide. I had to find a safe place, the safest. I hurried downstairs, down an escalator, down and down — at the bottom, I rushed around a corner, around a corner, ducked under the angle of the rolling stairs, down again, through a narrow hallway and down the cramped emergency stairs, into the cluttered basement, where I ducked behind some boxes — I found a tiny opening, a vent; no, not even that, just a narrow nook underneath the floorboards, I crawled sideways around an impossible angle, down into a deeper space, dark and bottomless, I climbed down the metal ladder, down and down, always downward, until I found the hatch into the pipes below the city — I padded through the dank underbelly of the world, sloshing through tubes illuminated by phantom iridescence, climbing into narrower and narrower pipes, until I found another ladder down, this one leading to ancient stone tunnels, maybe catacombs, I couldn't tell, except after a while, the walls were pulsing, lined with throbbing purple veins and bulbous growths, and farther down, cracks appeared in the walls, glowing red as embers, it was warm here, too warm, uncomfortably hot, molten lava seeping up through the floor, the edges of the rocky crust were limned with flame, I had to jump across the bubbling pits, bottomless chasms too, had I come so far that I would never find my way back? I knew this place. There was something here. Behind me. I turned around and —

Woke up with a startled grunt. My heart pounding.

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I fumbled around for my flashlight, the big heavy one filled with a half-dozen D-cells. Held overhand, it could be used as a club. If necessary. I'd put it on the nightstand next to Annie's bed so she could look to see that there were no monsters in the dark. I clicked it on myself. Yes, there were no monsters. I was actually relieved.

Padded off to the bathroom, fever dreams still resonant. Checked the thermostat. Opened the front door and sniffed the night. Thought about going to my own bed. Thought about a lot of things. Three o'clock in the morning thoughts. All the way down to the bottom one — why does the universe even exist? Why is there something instead of nothing?

I went to the kitchen and poured myself the last of the coffee, still sitting cold in the carafe; gave it a short ride in the microwave, then returned to Annie's room. I stood in the doorway, sipping half-heartedly at the bitter brew until it was cold and tasteless. I didn't want to get back into her bed. It was uncomfortable. But I didn't want to leave her alone either.

We had a big overstuffed chair in the den. I'd fallen asleep in it more than once, usually during some made-for-TV movie on the Lifetime channel. I pushed the chair into Annie's room, grabbed a pillow and a comforter, and made myself as comfortable as I could. I moved as quietly as I could through the darkness. I wasn't planning on staying up all night, watching, but if anything made a sound, I'd be right here. Just before settling in, I flicked on the flashlight, one last time, just to check, I don't know what made me do it —

— stopped. And stared. Above Annie's bed. My carefully constructed industrial-strength dreamcatcher had been chewed to bits, as if something with metal teeth had gnawed its way out. I lifted it off the hook on the wall, astonished and shaking my head and for the first time, honestly worried. Even a little scared.

Carried it into the kitchen and laid it on the counter. The fluorescent lights flickered on, momentarily dazzling me. What the bloody hell — ? The bicycle spokes were pulled every which way, the rim of the wheel was bent; the nylon webbing of the tennis rackets was unstrung, with bent and broken strands pointing out at odd angles. It looked as if someone or something had deliberately picked it apart.

All right, there had to be a rational explanation. Maybe it was the

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tension of the wires, maybe I'd strung the whole thing so tight it had unraveled in the middle of the night. Except I hadn't heard a sound. My sleep had been so uncertain these past few weeks, even the slightest rustle was enough to bring me bolt upright in bed. I couldn't imagine this thing twanging apart above my head without my hearing something. Unless I'd been so tired, so exhausted, so lost in sleep, so down in the dream — could the sound of this thing pulling itself apart have triggered my dreams of descent — ? *Underneath*?

No. I wasn't ready to go there yet. I'd read articles about "unexplainable" phenomena that occurred at the nexus of standing waves — electrical, radio, sonic, whatever. Maybe this was like the guy who could hear the six o'clock news on his fillings? Yes, he had voices in his head, but it was only the local Ted Baxter. I tried to remember what I'd read about countermeasures. Put a large bowl of water next to an open window. Hang tinfoil strips. Rearrange the furniture. Install a ground wire. It all sounded like more dreamcatcher stuff. Just another belief system.

I wasn't going to figure it out tonight. I went back to Annie's room and plopped down next to her again. She snuggled into my arm and two blinks later, sunlight was streaming in through the window, illuminating the dust motes like bars of blue silver. I glanced over, saw she was sleeping peacefully, so I eased myself out of bed and went into the kitchen to start breakfast.

Eventually, Annie wandered in, still rubbing her eyes.

"How'd you sleep, sweetheart?"

"Okay, I guess."

"No bad dreams?"

"Uh-uh." And then she said, perceptively. "You had the bad dream for me, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I guess I did."

"Was it as bad as I said?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I can see why you were scared."

She glanced at the broken dreamcatcher. "That didn't work, did it?"

"I guess not." I started flipping pancakes. "We'll have to figure out something else."

We spent the day running errands, dropping things off, picking things up, maintaining all the separate machineries of suburbia. Annie didn't

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fuss; she held my hand and stayed close. I wished there was something I could do for her, some way I could pull her out of the shell she was building — something to distract her from her morbid fantasies of *underneath*.

A thought had been gnawing at me all morning. Annie was lonely. That's all. She had no one to belong to anymore. No one to trust. And no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't break through to her; there was a part of her she was going to keep to herself now.

Inevitably, she pulled me over to the pet store window. She always liked looking at the puppies. So did I — except while she was fussing about each little cute furry personality, I was feeling sorry for them, locked in those enclosures, those cages, like pieces of merchandise, unable to get out, unable to run and play and bark.

And always, the inevitable question, "Daddy, can we get a puppy? Puh-leeeeese? Look, this one's only sixty dollars."

I peered close. Only sixty dollars for twenty-four months. "Uh-uh, sweetheart. Not one of these."

"Why not — ?"

"Um, because — " *Why not*? " — because, these aren't good watchdogs."

"Why do we need a watchdog — ?"

"Because I can't sleep with you every night. We need a special kind of watchdog — a dream watchdog. A little pooch to snuggle up next to you and not let any bad dreams get in. Just like I did."

"Oh." She considered it. I could see her turning the thought over in her head. "Well, where do we get a dream watchdog?"

"Mmm, well, I dunno.... " I was barely a half-step ahead of her. We had been talking about a puppy, maybe for Christmas, but what with one thing and another, including a new baby on the way — we'd decided to wait a year, until Annie was bigger. Now, however, maybe a dog was just the right thing.

"I know — let's go to the animal shelter. I'll bet they have good dream dogs there." Annie grabbed my hand and started pulling. I let myself be led back toward the parking lot. By the time we got to the car, Annie was already making plans for her pound-puppy. "I'll give him my blue blanket, okay? And he'll sleep on my bed with me, okay? And I'll call him — um, what's a good name for a dream watchdog, Daddy?"

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"Well, it's been my experience that you have to live with a dog for three days, and at the end of three days, you'll know what his name is."

She nodded. "That sounds good."

The animal shelter is a depressing place. It's clean, the dogs are all well-cared for, the staff is friendly and helpful — but you know, going in, that there aren't enough homes for all these imploring hopeful faces. Only the young ones, the cute ones, the healthy ones are likely to find homes where they'll be loved. Annie limped in behind me and I realized again that she was no longer one of the cute or healthy ones. People would look at her, and then to me, and I could see the flicker of pity behind their eyes — *that poor man, having that poor disfigured child.*

The puppy cages were closest to the entrance. There weren't many to choose from. A scruffy and scraggly-looking lot. Except —

"Daddy, how about this one?"

"He's awfully small — "

"Oh, no — he's just the right size."

The card on the cage said he was a gray terrier-poodle mix, eight months old. To my eyes, he looked like he was half poodle, half opportunist; but his tail was bobbed. That indicated breeding, perhaps for show. Silvery fur, darker on top; not quite curly — kinky. He was all dreadlocks. He needed grooming. I didn't think there was very much dog inside all that fur, but he had bright attentive eyes. He watched us both, his gaze flicking back and forth between Annie and myself, then finally fixing on her as the most likely mark. He stood up, putting his paws against the bars, and tried to shove his tiny muzzle through, his tongue already licking toward Annie's fingers. She held out her hand the way I'd showed her, the back of the hand so the dog could sniff without being able to nip. He skipped the sniff, went right for the lick — this little pooch was people-friendly. More than that, he was desperate to be let out of this cage.

Without asking, I knew his backstory. It was a familiar one. This was last year's Christmas present to somebody, maybe somebody's child — and now they'd gotten tired of it, and so they discarded it, tossing it away as if it had no feelings of its own. This frantic little hairball had invested his whole being-ness into belonging to someone who couldn't be bothered to repay loyalty in kind. He had to be feeling confusion and hurt and fear. I hunched down on my knees and offered my own hand. "What do you

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"Therobar is innocent," I reported. "Probably."

"I was also innocent of any urge to become a gurgling bag of flesh and bones," said the integrator. "What has happened to me must also be resolved."

"First the one, then the other," I said.

"Is that a promise?"

"I am not accustomed to having to make promises to my own integrator," I said.

"Yet you expect me to put up with this," it said, pointing at itself with both small hands, fingers spread, a gesture that put me in mind of an indignant old man.

"Sometimes our expectations may require adjustment," I said.

I turned to the demon's portal to seek his views, but the entity had taken the opportunity to depart.

"Perhaps he has found another peepshow," I said.

THURLOYN VALE was an unpretentious transportation nexus at the edge of the great desolation that was Dimpfen Moor. Its dun-colored, low-rise shops and houses radiated in a series of arrondisements from a broad hub on which sat the airship terminal that was the place's reason for being. In former times, the entire town had been ringed by a high, smooth wall, now mostly tumbled in ruins. The barrier had been built to keep out the large and predatory social insects known as neropts that nested on the moor, but eventually an escalating series of clashes, culminating in a determined punitive expedition, led to a treaty. Now any neropt that came within sight of Thurloyn Vale, including flying nymphs and drones in their season, was legitimately a hunter's trophy; any persons, human or ultraterrene, who ventured out onto the moor need not expect rescue if they were carried off to work the insects' subterranean fungi beds or, more usually, if they were efficiently reduced to their constituent parts and borne back to the hive to feed the ever-hungry grubs.

Wan Water sat atop an unambitious hill only a short aircar flight into Dimpfen Moor, above a slough of peat brown water that gave the estate its name. It was a smallish demesne, with only a meager agricultural surround, since little would grow on that bleak landscape other than

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lichens and stunted bushes. Like the town, it was walled, but its barrier was well maintained and bristling with self-actuating ison-cannons. The presence of a nearby neropt nest afforded Wan Water's master the peace and tranquillity that I assumed he required to plan his charitable works. Without the insects, he might be pestered by uninvited visitors eager to harness their ambitious plans to Turgut Therobar's well-stocked purse. Coupled with an implied humility in his makeup, it seemed a likely explanation for having chosen such a cheerless place for his retreat.

With my integrator perched on my shoulder, I overflew a ramble of outbuildings and guest houses, then banked and curved down toward the manse. This was an arrangement of interconnected domes, each more broad than tall and linked one to the other by colonnades of twisted, fluted pillars, all of a gray stone quarried from the moor. Above the huddled buildings stood a tall natural tor of dark-veined rock, around which spiraled a staircase of black metal. Atop the eminence was a tidy belvedere of pale marble equipped with a demilune seat of a dark polished stone.

At the base of the tor I saw a black and green volante bearing the insignia of the Archonate Bureau of Scrutiny. Next to it stood a square-faced man in a uniform of the same colors. With the moor's constant wind whistling mournfully through the bars of the staircase, he advised me that Turgut Therobar had ascended the pillar of rock. We completed the formalities by which my client became my responsibility; then the scroot boarded his aircar and departed.

I turned and climbed to the top of the spiral stairs. There I found the magnate standing silently, his back to me and his front toward the grim prospect of Dimpfen Moor. I positioned myself to one side of him and used the occasion to acquire a detailed impression of my client.

He was a man of more than middling age and height, thick through the shoulders, chest and wrists, with heavy jowls and a saturnine expression beneath a hat that was a brimless, truncated cone of dark felt. He affected plain garments of muted colors, though they were well cut and of fine material, as if he disdained the fripperies and panaches of transient fashion. As I inspected him, I sought insight from my inner self and again received an inconclusive response. It was as if Therobar's being was a deep well, its upper reaches clear and pure yet shaded by darkness below. But whether anything sinister lurked in those depths could not be told.

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Without taking his eyes from the vista that I found gloomy but which apparently worked to restore his inner peace, he said, "Thank you for arranging my release."

I inclined my head but replied, "Any intercessor could have done it."

"No, it had to be you."

My internal distresses had strengthened as I climbed the stairs. I pushed them to the edge of my awareness and prepared to focus on my responsibilities. "I am flattered by your confidence," I said. "Shall we discuss the case?"

"Later. For now I wish to look out upon the moor and contemplate the vagaries of fate."

"You are of a philosophical bent," I said. "Faced with imminent incarceration in the Contemplarium, most men would find their concentration drawn to that threat."

He turned toward me. "I am not most men. I am Therobar. It makes all the difference." A note of grim satisfaction rang softly through this speech.

The chill wind had been insinuating itself into my garments since we had mounted the tower. Now it grew more insistent. My integrator moved to nestle against the lee side of my head and I felt it shiver. The motion drew Therobar's eye.

"That is an unusual beast," he said.

"Most unusual."

The expression, "a piercing gaze" is most often an overstatement, but not in Therobar's case. He examined my assistant closely and said, "What is its nature?"

"We are discovering that together," I answered. "Right now it would be premature to say."

His eyes shifted to mine and for a moment I felt the full impact of his gaze. The back of my mind stirred like a watchbeast disturbed by a faint sound. Involuntarily, I stepped back.

"Forgive me," he said. "I have a tendency to peer."

I made a gesture to indicate that the matter was too trivial to warrant an apology, but the resident of the rear corners of my psyche took longer to subside.

We descended to the main buildings and passed within. It was a relief

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to be out of the wind, though I could still hear it softly moaning and shuffling across the roofs of the domes. Therobar handed me over to a liveried servant who escorted me to a suite of rooms where I refreshed myself, finding the appointments of the first quality. The man waited in the suite's anteroom to guide me to a reception room where my client had said he would await me.

I had placed my integrator on the sleeping pallet before going into the ablutory to wash. Returning, I extended my arm so that it might climb back to its wonted place upon my shoulders. I realized as I made the gesture that I was already becoming accustomed to its warmth and slight weight.

The creature came to me without taking its eyes from the footman who stood impassively beside the door. I noticed that the fur behind its skull was standing out like the ruffs that were fashionable when I was in school. I made a gesture to myself as if I had forgotten some trivial matter and returned to the washroom. There I lowered my voice and said to my assistant, "Why are you doing that?"

It moved to the far edge of my shoulder so it could look at me and said, "I am doing several things. To which do you refer?"

"Making your neck hair stand on end."

It reached up a paw and stroked the area. "It appears to be an autonomic response."

"To what?"

Its eyes flicked about then it said, "I think, to the presence of the footman."

"Why?"

"I do not know. I have had neither neck hair nor involuntary responses before."

"I should perform a diagnostic inquisition on you," I said.

"And just how would you go about doing that in my new condition?" it asked.

"Yes," I said, "I will have to think about that."

We went out to the anteroom and the servant opened the door to the corridor, but I stayed him. It might be useful to question him about the events that led up to Therobar's arrest. Servants often know more than they are supposed to about their masters' doings, even though they will

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invariably adopt an expression of blinking innocence when barked at by an inquisitive scroot like Warhanny. But let the interrogation be conducted by someone who has questions in one hand and coins in the other, and memories that had previously departed the servant's faculties come crowding back in, eager to reveal themselves.

"What can you tell me about your master's arrest?" I asked.

"Agents of the Bureau of Scrutiny came in the morning. They spoke with the master. When they left, he accompanied them."

This information was delivered in a disinterested tone, as if the man were describing a matter of no particular moment. His eyes were a placid brown. They rested on me blandly.

"What of the events that led up to the arrest?" I said.

"What of them?"

"They involved a number of deaths and some unsavory acts perpetrated on a girl."

"So I was told."

The servant's lack of affect intrigued me. "What did you think of the matter?" I asked.

"My memories of the incidents are vague, as if they occurred in another life."

"Struggle with them," I said, producing a ten-hept piece. I was surprised that the impassivity of his gaze did not so much as flicker, nor did he reach for the coin. Still I persisted. "What did you think of the crime?"

He shrugged. "I don't recall thinking of it at all," he said. "My duties occupy me fully."

"You were not shocked? Not horrified?"

"No."

"What were your emotions?"

The brown eyes blinked slowly as the man consulted his memory. After a moment he said, "When the Allers girl was brought in, she was hysterical. I was sent to the kitchens to fetch a restorative. The errand made me late in preparing the sleeping chambers for the master's guests. I was chagrined but the master said it was a forgivable lapse."

"You were chagrined," I said.

"Briefly."

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"Hmm," I said.

I flourished the ten-hept piece again and this time the fellow looked at it but again showed no interest. I put it away. Turgut Therobar had a reputation for aiding the intellectually deficient. I reasoned that this man must be one of his projects and that I would gain no more from interrogating him than I would from questioning the mosses on Dimpfen Moor. "Lead me," I said.

I was brought to a capacious reception room in the main dome. Therobar was in the center of the great space, making use of a mobile dispenser. He had changed his garments and now wore a loose-fitting gown of shimmering fabric and a brocaded cloth headpiece artfully wound about his massive skull. He was not alone. Standing with him were an almost skeletally thin man in the gown and cap of an Institute don and a squat and hulking fellow who wore the stained smock of an apparaticist and a cloche hat. All three turned toward me as I entered, abruptly cutting off a conversation they had been conducting in muted tones. We offered each other the appropriate formal salutations, then Turgut made introductions.

The lean academician was Mitric Gevallion, with the rank of sessional lecturer in dissonant affinities — the name rang a faint chime but I could not immediately place him — and the bulky apparaticist was his assistant, who went by the single name Gharst: "They are conducting research into some matters that have piqued my curiosity. I have given them the north wing. We've been having a most fascinating discussion."

He handed me a glass of aperitif from a sideboard. I used the time it took to accept and sip the sharply edged liquor to cover my surprise at finding myself drawn into a social occasion after being summoned to an urgent rescue. There seemed no reason not to raise the obvious question, so I did.

"Should we not be concerned rather with your situation?"

For a moment, my meaning did not register, then his brow cleared. "Ah, you mean Warhanny and all that." He dismissed the subject with a lightsome wave of his meaty hand. "Tomorrow is soon enough."

"The matter seemed more pressing when you contacted me," I said.

His lips moved in the equivalent of a shrug. "When confined to the Bureau of Scrutiny's barren coop one has a certain perspective. It alters when one is ensconced in the warmth of home."

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There was not much warmth apparent. I thought the room designed more for grandeur than comfort. "Still," I began but he spoke over my next words, urging me to hear what Gevallion had to say. Out of deference to my host, I subsided and gave the academician my polite attention.

"I am making progress in redefining gist within the context of configuration," the thin man said.

Gevallion's name now came into focus and I stifled a groan by sipping from the glass of aperitif. There was a subtle undertone to its flavor that I could not quite identify. As I listened further to the academic, a memory blossomed. In my student years at the Institute, I had written an offhand reply to a paper posted on the Grand Forum, demolishing its preposterous premises and ending with a recommendation that its author seek another career since providence had clearly left him underequipped for intellectual pursuits. I now saw that Mitric Gevallion had not taken my well-meant advice but had remained at the Institute, dedicating his life to the pursuit of the uncatchable; he was a seeker after gist, the elusive quality identified by the great Balmerion uncounted eons ago as the underlying substance of the universe. Gist bound together all of time, energy, matter, and the other, less obvious components into an elegant whole.

Apparently he had forgotten my criticism of his work since he did not mention it upon our being introduced. It seemed good manners not to bring it up myself, but I could not, in all conscience, encourage his fruitless line of inquiry. "You are not the first to embark on the gist quest," I said, "though you would certainly be the first to succeed."

"Someone must be first at everything," he said. He had one of those voices that mix a tone of arrogance with far too much resonance through the nasal apparatus. Listening to him was like being lectured to by an out-of-tune bone flute.

"But gist is, by Balmerion's third dictum, beyond all grasp," I said. "The moment it is approached, even conceptually, it disappears. Or departs — the question remains open."

"Exactly," the academician said. "It cannot be apprehended in any way. The moment one seeks to delineate or define it, it is no longer there."

"And perhaps that is for the best," I said. I reminded him of Balmerion's own speculation that gist had been deliberately put out of reach by a hypothetical demiurge responsible for drafting the metaphysical charter

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of our universe. "Otherwise we would pick and pick and pick at the fabric of existence until we finally pulled the thread that unraveled the whole agglomeration."

Turgut Therobar entered the conversation. "Master Gevallion leans, as I am coming to do, toward Klapczyk's corollary to Balmerion's dictum."

I had earlier restrained a groan, now I had to fight down an incipient snort. The misguided Erlon Klapczyk had argued that the very hiddenness of gist bespoke the deity's wish that we seek and find it, and that this quest was in fact the reason we were all here.

I said, "I recall hearing that Klapczyk's adolescent son once advanced his father's corollary as an excuse for having overturned the family's ground car after being forbidden to operate it. Klapczyk countered his own argument by throwing things at the boy until he departed and went to live with a maternal aunt."

"I agree it is a paradox," Gevallion said, then quoted, "'Is it not the purpose of paradox to drive us to overcome our mental limitations?'"

"Perhaps," I said. "Or perhaps what you take for a teasing puzzle is instead more like a dutiful parent's removal of a devastating explosive from the reach of a precocious toddler. If I were to begin to list the people to whom I would not give the power to destroy the universe, even limiting the list to those who would do so only accidentally, I would soon run out of stationery."

Therobar offered another dismissive wave. I decided it was a characteristic gesture. "I care not for a cosmos ruled by a prating nanny," he said. "I prefer to see existence as veined throughout by a mordant sense of irony. Gevallion's speculations are more to my taste than Balmerion's tiptoeing caution."

"Even if he budges the pebble that brings down the avalanche?"

The magnate's heavy shoulders rose and fell in an expression of disregard. "We are entering the last age of Old Earth, which will culminate in the Sun's flickering senility. All will be dark and done with."

"There are other worlds than this."

"Not when I am not standing on them," Therobar said. "Besides, what is life without a risk? And thus, the grander the risk, the grander the life."

I was coming to see my client from a new perspective. "I really think we should discuss the case," I said.

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"I've set aside some time after breakfast," he said, then turned and asked Gevallion to explain some point in his theories. After hearing the first few words, I let my attention wander and inspected the room. It was lofty ceilinged, the curving walls cut by high, narrow windows through which the orange light of late afternoon poured in to make long oblongs on the deep pile of the rich, blood-red carpeting that stretched in all directions. One end of the room was dominated by a larger-than-life mural that displayed Turgut Therobar in the act of casually dispensing something to a grateful throng. Not finding the image to my taste, I turned to see what might be in the other direction and noticed a grouping of divans and substantial chairs around a cheerful hearth. Seated in a love chair, placidly regarding the flames, was a young woman of striking beauty.

Therobar noted the direction of my gaze. "That is the Honorable Gevallion's ward, Yzmirl. She is also assisting him in his researches."

"Would you care to meet her?" Gevallion said.

I made a gesture of faint demurral. "If the encounter would not bore her."

Therobar chuckled. "No fear of that. Come."

We crossed the wide space, the drinks dispenser whispering over the carpet in our wake. The young woman did not look our way as we approached, giving me time to study her. She was beyond girlhood but had not yet entered her middle years. Her face had precisely the arrangement of features that I have often found compelling: large and liquid eyes, green but with flecks of gold, an understated nose and a generous mouth. Her hair was that shade of red that commands attention. It fell straight to her shoulders where it was cut with geometric precision. She wore a thin shift made of layers of a gauzy material, amber over plum, leaving her neck, arms, and shoulders bare.

"My dear," said Gevallion, "allow me to present the Honorable Henghis Hapthorn, a discriminator who is assisting our host with matters that need not concern us."

She remained seated but looked up at me. I made a formal salute and added a gallant flourish. Her placid expression did not alter but it seemed that I had captured her interest, since she stared fixedly at me with widened eyes. It was a moment before I realized that the true focus of her gaze was not my face but the transmogrified integrator that crouched upon

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my shoulder. At the same time I became aware that the creature was issuing into my ear a hiss like that of air escaping from pressurized containment. I gave my head a sharp shake and the annoying sound ceased though I thought to detect a grumble.

"What is that on your shoulder?" Yzmirl asked. Her voice was soft, the tone polite, yet I experienced a reaction within me. It was just the kind of voice I preferred to hear.

"I have not yet reached a conclusion on that score," I said.

The green eyes blinked sleepily. She said, "There was a character in Plobbit's most recent novel, *Spelling Under a Fall*, who trained a large toad to squat on his shoulder. At a signal from its master, the beast would send a jet of unmentionable liquid in the direction of anyone who offended him."

"I recall it," I said. "Do you enjoy Plobbit?"

"Very much," she said. "Do you?"

"He is my favorite author."

"Well, then," she said.

Therobar cleared his throat. "I have some matters to attend to before dinner," he said.

"As do we," said Gevallion, draining his glass and dropping it into the dispenser's hopper. "Yzmirl, would you mind entertaining our friend for a while?"

"I would not mind," she said. She patted the seat next to her to indicate that I should sit. I did so and became aware of her perfume.

"Is that *Cynosure* you're wearing?" I said.

"Yes. Do you like it?"

"Above all other scents." I was not exaggerating. The perfume had had an almost pheromonical effect on me when I had encountered it on other women. On Yzmirl, its allure was compounded by her exquisite appearance.

"I please you?" she asked, her eyes offering me pools into which I could plunge and not care that I drowned.

"Oh, indeed."

"How nice," she said. "Why don't you tell me about your work? What are your most notable exploits?"

The integrator hissed again. I could feel its fur against my ear and realized it must be swelling up as it had in the presence of the footman.

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I reached up with one hand and found that the skin at the nape of its wiry neck was loose enough to afford me a grip. I lifted the creature from my shoulder and deposited it behind the love chair while my other hand covered that of Yzmirl where she had let it rest on the brocaded fabric between us.

"Well," I said, "would you care to hear about the case of the purloined passpartout?"

"Oh, yes," she said.

The integrator was making sounds just at the threshold of hearing. I disregarded its grumpy murmurs and said, "It all began when I was summoned to the office of a grand chamberlain in the Palace of the Archonate...."

TIME PASSED, though its passage made scant impression. After I told the tale of the Archon Dezendah's stolen document, she asked for more, and I moved on to the case of the Vivilosc fraud ring. Between episodes we refreshed our palates with offerings from the dispenser: I twice refilled my glass with the increasingly agreeable aperitif; she took a minim of Aubreen's restorative tincture, drawing in its pale blue substance by pursing her lips in a manner that was entirely demure yet at the same time deliciously enticing. My hand moved from hers, first to caress her arm, then later I let my fingertips brush the softness where neck met shoulder. She made no complaint but continued to regard me with an unshielded gaze. My innards quaked from time to time, but I pushed the sensation to the borders of my mind.

A footman entered the room and crossed to where we sat. I repressed an urge toward irritation and looked up as he approached. It was the same fellow who had obliquely responded to my questions. Or at least I thought it was as he approached. When he afforded me a closer inspection, it seemed that this might be instead a close relation of the other. I reached for my memory of the earlier encounter but found it veiled by too much aperitif and the heady scent of the young woman beside me.

"My master bids me tell you," said the servant, after a lackluster salute, "that an urgent matter has called him from the estate. He regrets that he cannot join you for dinner."

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"How long will he be gone?" I asked.

"He said he might not return before morning."

In the brief silence that ensued I could hear my integrator hissing behind the love seat. I reached over to swat it to silence but missed. "What of Gevallion and Gharst?" I said.

"They accompany the master on his journey."

"So it is just us two?"

The fellow tilted his head in a way that confirmed my supposition, though his expression remained unmoved. "The master suggested that you and the Lady Yzmirl might prefer to dine in the comfort of your quarters."

My eyes widened. I looked at Yzmirl but her expression showed neither alarm nor disinclination. "Would you be comfortable with such an arrangement?" I asked her.

"Of course."

"Then it's settled."

We rose and followed the footman to my suite, the integrator trundling along behind on its short legs, spitting and grumping just at the threshold of audibility. I looked back at one point and saw that its tail was twitching and its little fists were clenched. But when we arrived at my rooms, to find the first course of our dinner ready to be served, I chivvied the ill-tempered beast into the ablutory and closed the door so that Yzmirl need not feel distracted or constrained.

I found the food excellent, the company enchanting, and the aftermath an unparalleled delight. Yzmirl displayed only a genteel interest in what was placed before her at the table but, after the servant returned and took away the remains of the meal, she revealed a robust appetite and surprising inventiveness in another room.

I AWOKE ALONE. Or so I thought until I arose and entered the washroom, where a small, furry, and angry presence made itself known.

"Apparently, I need to eat," it said in a tone that was far from deferential.

"Eat what?"

There was fruit on a side table in the main salon. It went and sampled

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this and that. I was prepared to offer advice on the arts of chewing and swallowing but the creature mastered these skills without trouble. I thought a compliment might lighten the atmosphere but my encouraging words were turned back on me. "I've seen you do it thousands of times," it said. "How hard could it be?"

"Then you'll be able to work out the other end of the alimentary process for yourself?" I said.

"I shall manage."

I performed my morning toilet and emerged to find the integrator perched on the back of chair, its tail flicking like a petulant pendulum and a frown on its face. "What?" I said.

"I cannot connect to the grid."

"Why not?"

"I don't know why not."

"Hmm," I said. "Ordinarily, I would perform a diagnostic procedure on your systems and components. Now I would first have to take advice from...." I had been going to specify a person who was skilled in the care of animals, but I had a suspicion that this particular creature might baffle such a specialist.

"How does it...feel, I suppose that's the word, to be unable to connect?"

It put on its introspective look for a moment, then said, "It feels as if I ought to be able to connect but cannot."

"As if you were out of range?"

"As if I was blocked."

There was a knock on the door and the footman entered. Again my integrator's fur raised itself involuntarily and again I was not quite sure that this was the same fellow I had encountered before.

"The master would like you to join him for breakfast," he said. The voice sounded identical, yet there was something around the eyes and the mouth that seemed slightly different.

There was no obvious reason to be circumspect. I said, "Are you the same footman who yesterday led me to meet your master and returned me here?"

His expression registered no surprise at the question. He looked at me neutrally and said, "Why do you ask?"

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"Because I wish to know."

His answer was unexpected. "It is difficult to say."

"Why? It is a simple question."

"There are no simple questions," he said. "Only simple questioners. But I will address the issue. Are you the same person who arrived here yesterday? Since then you have had new experiences, met new people, consumed and excreted the air of this place and other substances. Has none of this had any effect on you?"

"The argument is abstruse," I said. "Assume the broadest of definitions and answer: Are you the same footman whom I encountered yesterday?"

"Under the broadest definition, it would be difficult to distinguish me from any other entity, including you."

The fellow was obviously a simpleton. "Lead me to your master," I said. As he turned to depart I beckoned my integrator to mount to my shoulder again. It was hissing and its fur was once more ruffed about its neck.

I FOUND TURGUT THEROBAR in a morning room in the great dome. He wore loose attire: ample pantaloons, a billowing shirt, chamois slippers, all in muted tones with plain fasteners. His head was again swathed in a silken cloth. He did not rise from his chair as I entered but beckoned me to sit across from him. A low table between us bore plates of bread, bowls of fruit, and cups to be filled from a steaming carafe of punge.

He exhibited an air of sleepy self-satisfaction, blinking lazily as he inquired as to how I had passed the night. I assured him that I had rested well but offered an observation that he did not appear to have slept much. He extended his lower lip and made a show with his eyebrows that signaled that his rest or lack of it was of small concern. "A necessary task occupied most of the night," he said, "but it was well worth the doing."

I raised my brows in inquiry, but when he added no more, I politely changed the subject. "We should discuss the case," I said.

"As you wish. How would you like to proceed?"

I poured myself a cup of punge and chose a savory brioche, then

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ordered my mind as I chewed, sipped, and swallowed. "First," I said, "I will rehearse the known elements of the matter. Then I wish to know everything, from the beginning."

The charges concerned the disappearance of a number of persons in the vicinity of Wan Water over recent months. Initially, it had been thought that they had wandered into range of neropt hunting parties, the usual precursor to sudden disappearances on Dimpfen Moor.

The break in the case came when a tenant's young daughter, Bebe Allers, had gone missing from Wan Water only to reappear after a few days wandering within the walls of the estate. She was in a state of confusion and distress, with vague memories of being seized, transported, confined, and perhaps interfered with in intimate ways. She could not directly identify the person or persons responsible for the outrage, but she had blanched and screamed at the sight of an image of Turgut Therobar.

"Now," I said, "how do you answer?"

He spoke and his face and tone betrayed a blasé unconcern that I found surprising. But the substance of his response was nothing less than astonishing. "The affair is now moot," he said. "Events have moved on."

I set my cup and plate on the table. "Wealth and social rank will not keep you from the Archon's Contemplarium if you are adjudged to be at fault."

His eyes looked up and away. "The case is nuncupative."

"Colonel-Investigator Warhanny will take a different view."

He chose a cake and nibbled at its topping.

"Please," I said, "I have given surety for you. My interests are also at stake."

He smiled and it was not a pleasant sight. There was a glint in his eye that gave me an inkling as to why the victim had reacted with horror to his image. "You will soon find," he said, "that you have more pressing concerns."

My integrator was hissing quietly beside my ear. The intuitive part of me was alert and urging unspecified action. I stood up. "You had better explain," I said.

He regarded me as if I had just executed some comic trick and he expected me to perform another. "Oh, I shall explain," he said. "Triumphs gain half their delight from being appreciated by those who have been triumphed over."

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To my assistant I said, quietly, "Contact Warhanny. Tell him I withdraw from the case."

"I still cannot connect," it said.

"If I may interrupt your communion with your pet," Therobar said, "I was about to relieve your mind concerning the case."

"Very well," I said. "Do so."

He made a face like that of a little boy admitting a naughtiness to an indulgent caregiver and spread his hands. "I am guilty," he said.

"You interfered with the young maiden?"

"Indeed."

"And the disappearances?"

Again the protruding lip and facial shrug, which I took as an admission of culpability.

There could be only one question: "Why?"

"Two reasons," he said, throwing away the cake, now denuded of its topping, and reaching for another. "The disappeared assisted in Mitric Gevallion's experiments."

"You have been experimenting on human beings?"

"We'd gone as far as we could with animals. What else was there to do?"

I was being given an unobstructed view into Therobar's psyche. I shuddered involuntarily. "What were the aims of these experiments?"

"As we discussed last night: at first we were seeking to redefine gist so that we could employ it in various efforts at carnal reconfiguration."

I translated his remark. "You were trying to harness the elementary force of the universe in order to transform living creatures."

"Yes." His sharp-pointed tongue licked cream from the core of his pastry.

"Why?"

"Why not?"

"That is never a reason," I said.

"You may be right. In any case, we soon found another."

He was smiling, waiting for me to ask. I obliged him. "What did you find?"

"We discovered that we could 'reorder' animals from one species to another, though they were never happy in their new skins. So then we

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tried 'editing' them, again with interesting results. We produced several disparate versions from the same template: one would be ferocious, another painfully meek; one would have an overpowering urge to explore its territory, while the next iteration would not stir from its den." He drank from his cup of punge. "Do you understand what we had achieved?"

He was waiting again. "I am sure you would enjoy telling me," I said.

"We kept the shape, but discarded the contents, so to speak."

I had an insight. "You found you could work with form while discarding essence."

"Exactly. And, of course, once we had done it with beasts we had to try it with people."

"It is monstrous," I said.

"An entirely accurate description, at first. They were indeed monsters. We turned them loose to bellow and rampage on the moor, where the neropts found them and carried them off."

"But then?" I asked.

He wriggled with self-satisfaction. "But then we refined the process and began striking multiples from the originals. They are short-lived but they serve their purposes."

I understood. "The footmen," I said. "They are copies."

"And not just the footmen," he said, an insinuating smile squirming across his plump lips.

I was horrified. "Yzmirl," I whispered, then put iron in my voice. "Where is she?"

"Nowhere," he said. "She was, now she is not. Though Gevallion can whip up another at any time. That one was specifically designed to appeal to your tastes and petty vanities."

I did not trust myself to stand over him. I sat and turned my vision inward, encountering images of deep and tender pathos. After a while, he spoke, dragging my attention back to his now repulsive face.

"You haven't asked about the second reason," he said.

My mind had wandered far from the discussion. I indicated that I was not following.

"The disappeared," he said, speaking as if I were a particularly slow child, "went into Gevallion's vats. Then there was the Allers girl. She was the template for your companion of last night, by the way."

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I took a labored breath. It was as if his evil thickened the air. "All right," I said. "Why did you let the girl be found?"

"Because that would bring Warhanny. And Warhanny would bring you."

"And why must you bring me?"

"Because by being here, you were not there."

"And where is 'there'?"

He smiled. "At your rooms, of course. Where there were items I wished to acquire."

I allowed anger to take me. I kicked the low table at his legs and sprang to overpower him. But he was ready. An object appeared in his hand. At its center was a small black spot. As I leapt toward him the circle abruptly expanded and rushed out to encompass me in nothingness.

MITRIC GEVALLION'S laboratory was an unprepossessing place, dimly lit and woefully untidy. It featured a long workbench crowded with apparatus and a large display board on which a meandering set of equations and formulae had been scrawled. The vats in which the gist hunter brewed his creations loomed to one side of the wide, low-ceilinged room. Against the opposite wall was a sturdy cage and it was within its confines that I regained consciousness.

"Ah," said Gevallion, when Gharst, who had been sucking at a wound on one thick thumb, drew his attention to my blinking and pate-rubbing. Therobar's shocker had left me muzzified and aching, but I was now recovering as the academician crossed the cluttered floor to regard me through the bars. "Ah, there you are, back with us," he said.

I saw no need to join him in assertions of the obvious, and fixed him instead with a disdainful stare. I might as well have struck him with a cobweb for all the impact I achieved.

Gevallion rubbed his thin, pale hands together. "We're just waiting for our host to join us, then we'll begin," he said.

I knew he wanted me to ask what was to ensue, but I denied him that satisfaction. After a moment, his eyes moved from my face to focus on a point to one side of it. "That is a most curious creature," he said. "We tried to examine it while you were...resting, but it shrieked and bit Gharst quite viciously. What is it?"

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When I did not answer, he made a moue with his thin lips and said, "It does not signify. I will dissect the beast at leisure after you are...shall we say, through with it."

It was another attempt to elicit a response from me, and I ignored it like the others. My mind was now concentrated on the display board and I was following the calculations thereon. The mathematics were abstruse but familiar, until they reached the third sequence. There I saw that Gevallion's extrapolation of Balmerion's premises had taken a sudden and entirely unexpected departure. He had achieved a complete overturning of the ancient premises and yet as I proceeded to examine each step in his logic, I saw that it all held together.

"You're looking for the flaw," he said, now sounding the way a bone flute would sound if it could experience complacent triumph.

I said nothing, but the answer he sought must have been unmistakable in my expression. I ran my eyes over the calculations again, looking for the weakness, the false syllogism, the unjustified leap. There was none.

Finally, I could not deny my curiosity. "How?" I said.

"Simple," was his answer, "yet achingly difficult. Although it went against everything we are taught, I consciously accepted the gnosis that magic and rationalism alternate in a vast cycle, and that whenever the change comes the new regime obliterates all memory of the other's prior ascendancy. I then asked myself, 'If it were so, what would be the mechanism of change?' And the answer came: there is gist, it exists in this half of the cycle; the other half is opposite, therefore it must contain opposite gist. I thereby conceived the concept of negative gist."

"Negative gist," I repeated, and could not keep the wonder from my voice.

"And negative gist, viewed from our side of the dichotomy, is susceptible to definition. Define it, then reverse it, and you have a definition of positive gist. Although it is hard to remember. It slides easily out of understanding."

Negative gist, I thought. *Why had I not seen it?*

He knew what I was thinking. "You were not supposed to," he said. "None of us are. Even with it written on the board I had trouble keeping it in mind. I kept wanting to erase the equations. Then I relocated to Wan Water where conditions are more accommodating."

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"How so?"

"The transition from rationalism to sympathy does not cross our universe in a wavefront, as dawn sweeps across a planet. It occurs almost everywhere at once, like seepage through a porous membrane, but there are discrete locations — dimples, I call them — where the earliest seepage pools. Here the effects are intensified."

"And Wan Water is such a place," I said.

"Indeed. That is why our host chose to build here."

"It seems to be a time for surprises," I said. There was something more that needed to be said. "I am not often wrong, but in this matter of gist I assuredly was. I offer you my apologies and my congratulations."

"Graciously done," he said. "Both are accepted." He added a formal salute appropriate to academic equals.

I returned it and said, "Since we are on good terms, perhaps you would unlock the cage."

His expression of regret seemed sincere. "I'm afraid Turgut Therobar has other plans. More to the point, he has the only key."

At that moment, Gharst called to say that something on the bench had reached a critical point of development. Gevallion rushed to his side. They busied themselves with an apparatus constructed of intricately connected rods and coils, then Gevallion made a last adjustment and the two stood back in postures of expectation. In the air a colorless spot had appeared, a globular shape no larger than my smallest fingernail, connected to the apparatus by a filament as thin as gossamer. Gevallion nudged a part of the contraption on the bench and the spot grew larger and darker while the connector thickened. I saw motion seemingly within the sphere, a slow roiling as of indistinct shapes turning over and about each other.

The room was also charged with strange energies. My inner discomforts now increased. I felt as if both flesh and being were penetrated by vital forces, causing an itching of my bones and a sense of some impending revelation, though I could not tell if it would burst upon me or from me.

Gevallion said something to Gharst and the assistant gingerly touched the apparatus. The academician pushed him aside and made a more determined adjustment. The globe rapidly expanded until it was perhaps three times the diameter of Gharst's outsized head, then quickly shimmered and redoubled in size. The connecting conduit grew as thick as my

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wrist. Now the apparition seemed to become stable. I fought the intense irritation the device was causing in my innermost parts and studied the globe closely. I saw that the shifting colors and indeterminate shapes that moved within it were familiar, and began to plan a surprise.

"That is as much as we can achieve at this point," Gevallion told Gharst. "Advise Turgut Therobar that we are ready for his contribution."

The assistant spoke into a communications nexus beside the bench. I heard a muffled response.

The dim room became silent and still. The two experimenters stood by the bench, the globe swirled placidly in the air, and a small voice mumbled in my ear. For the moment, I ignored it.

If I had any doubts on the matter they were soon resolved. The door opened and in strode Turgut Therobar, swathed in the multihued robes and lap-eared cap of a thaumaturge. The costume should have appeared comical, yet did not. His face bore an expression of fevered anticipation and his hands clasped another disconcertingly familiar object: Bristall Baxandell's leather-bound tome, last seen in my workroom.

I could feel my assistant's fur standing up and tickling the side of my neck. The murmuring in my ear grew more insistent.

I whispered back, "Don't worry."

Therobar inspected the swirling globe and beamed at Gevallion and Gharst, then shot me a look that contained a mixture of sentiments. He placed the great book on the workbench and opened it, ran his finger down a page and his tongue across his ripe lips. "The Chrescharrie first, don't you think?" he said to Gevallion, who nodded nervous agreement.

I recognized the name as that of a minor deity worshipped long ago by a people now almost forgotten. I heard more mumblings in my ear. "Shush," I said, under my breath.

Therobar removed his cap and I saw that his hairless scalp was densely tattooed with figures and symbols such as I had seen in books of magic lore. He rubbed one hand over the smooth skin of his pate, then took a deep breath and intoned a set of syllables. Something pulsed along the cable that connected sphere to apparatus. He spoke again, and again the connector palpitated as if something traversed along its length. The colors in the sphere flashed and fluoresced. There was a crackling sound and the air of the room suddenly smelled sharply of ozone. My internal organs felt

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as if they were seeking to trade places with each other and there was a pulsing pressure at the back of my head. My integrator abandoned my shoulder with a squawk, dropping to the floor where it grumbled and chittered in an agitated manner.

Therobar spoke again and made a calculated gesture. The sphere shimmered and flickered. There came a loud crack of energy and a fountain of blue sparks cascaded from the globe. The swirl coalesced and cohered at its center, becoming a six-armed homunculus, red of skin and cobalt of eye — there was only one, in the middle of its forehead — seated crosslegged on black nothingness that now otherwise filled the orb. Meanwhile a sensation like a hot scouring wind shot through me.

Therobar consulted the book once more and spoke three guttural sounds, meanwhile moving hands and fingers in precise motions. The figure in the globe started as if struck. Its eye narrowed and its gash of a mouth turned downward in a frown. Its several arms flexed and writhed while it seemed to be attempting to rise to its split-hoofed feet. Therobar spoke and gestured again, a long string of syllables, and the homunculus subsided, though with a patent show of anger in its face.

Now the thaumaturge took another deep breath and barked a harsh phrase. There was a reek of raw power in the air and a thrumming sound just at the limits of perception. My bones were rattling against each other at the joints.

Therobar raised one hand, the index finger extended, then swiftly jabbed it into his forehead. The figure in the globe did likewise with one of its upper limbs, though its sharp-nailed digit struck not flesh and bone but its own protruding eye. It gave a squeal of pain and frustrated rage.

Therobar's eyes widened and I saw a gleam of triumph in them. For a moment I thought he might voice some untoward cry of victory, which would have put us all in deadly peril, but he mastered the impulse and instead chanted a lengthy phrase. The glowering deity in the sphere shimmered and dissolved into fragments of light, and once again the orb contained only shifting shapes and mutating colors.

The thaumaturge let out a sigh of happy relief. Gevallion and Gharst came from the other side of the workbench and there followed a few moments of back slapping, hand gripping, and — on Therobar's part — a curious little dance that I took to express unalloyed joy.

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When the demonstration was over, he looked my way and with an expression of satiated pleasure said, "Allow me to explain what you just saw."

"No need," I said. "You have accessed a continuum in which there is no distinction between symbol and referent. You have encapsulated a small segment of that realm and used it as a secure enclosure in which you could summon up a minor deity and bend it to your will. After animals and humans it is the next natural step. Now I suppose you'll want to call up something more potent so that you can use it to rule the world."

Therobar's face took on an aggrieved pout and he regarded me without favor for a long moment.

I shrugged my itching shoulders. "Your ambitions are as banal as your taste in decor," I said.

I thought he would strike me, but he put down the impulse and sneered. "Do you know why I brought you here?" he said.

"So that you could steal Baxandell's book from my library."

"That was but the proximate cause," he said, and I detected a deeper animosity in the squinting of his eyes and the writhing of his mouth as he approached the cage. "Do you recall an evening at Dame Obrosz's salon several years ago?"

"There were many such occasions," I said. "One tends not to retain details."

"You were holding forth on the bankruptcy of magic."

"I am sure I have done so often."

"Yes." The syllable extended into a hiss. "But on that occasion, your arguments had a profound effect on me."

"That seems odd, since the evidence of the past few minutes indicates that you have spent years studying and mastering the magical lore that I inveighed against. Obviously I did not convince you."

"On the contrary, you convinced me utterly," he said. "But I was so offended by your strutting arrogance and insouciant contempt for all contrary opinion that I resolved then and there to devote my life to disproving your claims, and forcing you to acknowledge utter defeat."

"Congratulations," I said. "You have achieved the goal of your existence. I am glad to have been of such great use to you, but pray tell me, what will you do to fill the remaining years?"

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"Perhaps I will spend them tormenting you," he said. "And acquainting you with the depths of animosity you are capable of summoning up in otherwise placid souls."

"I think not." It seemed time to act. I did my best to ignore my peculiar inner sensations, though they had not diminished after Therobar dismissed the Chrescharrie. Focusing my will, I spoke certain words while making the usual accompanying gestures. Therobar stepped back, his face filling with a mingling of confusion and curiosity. The colors in the globe swirled anew, then I saw the familiar pattern of my demonic friend.

"I am beset," I called. "Please aid me."

The demon manifested a limb: thick, bristling with spines and tipped with a broad pincer-like claw. It reached out to Turgut Therobar as I had seen it do before to two other unfortunates. But the thaumaturge had already recovered his equilibrium. He stepped back, out of range, while shouting Gevallion's name.

The academician also overcame his surprise. He did something to the apparatus on the bench and the globe constricted sharply, trapping my friend's spiked appendage as if it were a noose that had tightened around the limb. I heard muffled sounds and saw the claw opening and closing in frustration, its pincers clicking as they seized only thin air.

Therobar was flipping through the book. He stopped at a page and from the way his eyes flashed I knew that it boded ill for my friend and me. "*Ghoroz ebror fareshti!*" he shouted. The orb shivered, then contracted further, to the size of a fist, then to a pinpoint, and finally it popped out of existence altogether. The demon's arm, severed neatly, flopped to the floor where it glowed and smoked for a moment before disappearing.

"Oh, dear," said Turgut Therobar. "I hope you weren't counting on that as your last resort."

"It would be premature to say," I said, but I heard little conviction in my own voice.

The thaumaturge rubbed his hands in a manner that implied both satisfaction with what had transpired and happy anticipation of further delights to come. "Shall I tell you what happens next?" he said.

I was casting about for a some stratagem by which I might escape or turn the tables, but nothing was coming to mind. I sought insight from the

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intuitive part of me that so often came to my aid, but received no sense of impending revelation. It was as if he were otherwise occupied.

Hello! I shouted down the mental corridor that led to his abode. *Now would be an apt time to assist!*

Meanwhile, Therobar was speaking. "You'll go into the vats, of course. I will create several versions of you, some comical, some pathetically freakish. I will make convincing Henghis Hapthorn facsimiles, but give them unpleasant compulsions, then send them out into society. Your reputation may suffer. Others will have the opportunity to outrun neropt foraging parties. I believe I'll also recreate you in a feminine edition." He smiled that smile that could make children scream. "Such fun."

The muted voice that had been rumbling in my ear now said, quite clearly, "Step aside."

I turned my head, wondering what my transformed integrator was up to, but the creature was huddled in a far corner of the cage nervously rubbing one hand over another. "Did you speak?" I said.

"No, I did," said the voice again, this time less quiet. "Now, get out of the way."

I experienced a novel sensation: I was shoved from within, not roughly but with decided firmness, as that part of me that I was accustomed to think of as fixed and immutable — my own mind — now found itself sharing my inner space with another partner. At the same time, the noxious itchings and shiftings among my inner parts faded to a normal quiescence.

"Wait," I said.

"I've already waited years," Therobar said, but I had not addressed him.

"As have I," said the voice in my head. "Now, move over before you get us both into even worse difficulty."

I acquiesced, and the moment I yielded I felt myself deftly nudged out of the way, as if I had been pressed into the passenger's seat of a vehicle so that someone else could assume the controls. I saw my own hand come up before my face, the fingers opening and closing, though I was not moving them. "Good," said the voice.

I spoke to the voice's owner as he spoke to me, silently within the confines of our shared cranium. "I know you," I said. "You're my

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indweller, the fellow at the other end of the dark passage, my intuitive colleague."

"Hush your chatter," was the response. "I need to concentrate."

I subsided. Through our common eyes I saw that Turgut Therobar had produced his weapon again and was aiming it at us while Gharst opened the cage with a key the thaumaturge had given him. Across the room, Gevallion threw me a sheepish look and opened the hatch of one of his vats, releasing a wisp of malodorous vapor.

As the cage door opened, I watched my hands come together in a particular way, then spread wide into a precise configuration. I heard my voice speaking words that were vaguely recognizable from one of Baxandell's books, the opening line of a cantrip known as Gamgripp's Irrepressible Balloon, whose title had made me laugh when I was a young man browsing through a book of spells. I did not laugh now as from my hands there emanated an expanding sphere of invisible force that pushed Therobar and Gharst away from me, lifting them over the workbench, then upward into the air until they were pressed against the far wall where it met the ceiling. Gevallion, seeing what was happening, tried to reach the door but was similarly caught and crushed against it.

Therobar was clearly finding it hard to breathe against the pressure the spell exerted against his chest, but the symbols on his scalp had taken on a darker shade and I could see that his lips were framing syllables. I heard my voice speak again while my hands made motions that reminded me of a needle passing thread through cloth. The thaumaturge's lips became sealed. "Faizul's Stitch," I said to my old partner, having recognized the spell.

"Indeed," was the reply.

He directed our body out of the cage, faltering only a little before he mastered walking. The apparatus on the bench was unaffected by the balloon spell and he picked it up in our hands and examined it from several angles. Its components and manner of operation were not difficult to analyze.

"Shall we?" he said.

"It seems only fair."

He activated the device, reestablishing the swirling sphere. I was relieved to see the familiar eddies of my transdimensional colleague

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reappear. My other part made room for me so that I could ask the demon, "Are you well?"

"Yes," he said, "I lost only form. Essence was not affected." He was silent for a moment and I recognized the pattern he assumed when something took his interest. "I see that the opposite is true for you."

"Indeed," I said, "allow me to introduce...myself, I suppose." I stepped aside and let the two of them make each other's acquaintance.

When the formalities were over, I voiced the obvious question: "Now what?"

I felt a sense of my other self's emotions, as one would feel warmth from a nearby fleshly body: he gave off an emanation of determined will, tempered by irony. "We must restore balance," he said, using my voice so that the three prisoners could hear. "Pain has been given and must therefore be received. Also fear, humiliation, and, of course, death for death."

"Indeed," I said. "That much is obvious. But I meant 'Now what?' for you and me."

"Ah," he said, this time within our shared skull. "We must reach an accommodation. At least temporarily."

"Why temporarily?" I asked, in the same unvoiced manner, then felt the answer flower in my mind in the way my intuitive other's contributions had always done during the long years of our partnership.

I digested his response, then continued. "You are the part of me — us — that is better suited to an age reigned over by magic. As the change intensifies, I will fade until I become to you what you have always been to me, the dweller down the back corridor."

"Indeed," was his response. "And from there you will provide me with analytical services that will complement and augment my leaps from instinct. It will be a happy collaboration."

"You will make me your integrator," I complained.

"My valued colleague," he countered.

I said nothing, but how could he fail to sense my reluctance to give up control of my life? His response was the mental equivalent of a snort. "What makes you think you ever had control?" he said.

I was moved to argue, but then I saw the futility of being a house divided. "Stop putting things in my head," I said.

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"I don't believe I can," he answered. "It is, after all, as much my head as yours."

My curiosity was piqued. "What was it like to live as you have lived, inside of me all of these years?"

There was a pause, then the answer came. "Not uncomfortable, once you learn the ropes. Don't fret," he added, "the full transition may not be completed for years, even decades. We might live out our mutual life just as we are now."

"Hence the need for an accommodation," I agreed. "Then let us wait for a quiet time and haggle it out."

He agreed and we turned our attention to the question of what to do with Therobar, Gevallion, and Gharst.

The demon was displaying silver, green, and purple flashes as he said, "It would be a shame to waste the academician's ability to create form without essence. I know of places in my continuum where such creations would command considerable value."

I had never inquired as to what constituted economics in the demon's frame of reference, but my intuitive half leapt to the correct interpretation. "But if you took them into your keeping and put them to work," he said, "would that not make you a peddler of smut?"

The silver swooshes intensified, but the reply was studiedly bland in tone. "I would find some way to live with the opprobrium," the demon said.

We released Gevallion and Gharst into demonic custody. They could not go as they were into that other universe, where any word they uttered would immediately become reified, and it was an unsettling experience to watch the demon briskly edit their forms so that they could never speak again. But I hardened myself by remembering Yzmirl and how they must have dealt with her, and in a few moments the messy business was concluded. The two were hauled, struggling and moaning, through the sphere. For good measure, the demon took their vats and apparatus as well, including the device of rods and coils from the workbench.

When he was ready to depart, my old colleague lingered in the sphere, showing more purple and green shot through with silver. "I may not return for a while," he said, "perhaps a long while. I will have much to occupy me."

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"I will miss our contests," I said, "but in truth I am sure I will also be somewhat busy with all of this..." — I rolled my eyes — "accommodating."

And so we said our good-byes and he withdrew, taking the sphere after him.

"That leaves Turgut Therobar," my inner companion said, this time aloud.

"Indeed." I let the magnate hear my voice as well. He remained squeezed against the far wall, his feet well clear of the floor. His eyes bulged and one cheek had acquired a rapid twitch.

"Warhanny would welcome his company."

"Somehow, the Contemplarium does not seem a sufficient sanction for the harm he has done."

"No, it doesn't."

Therobar made noises behind his sealed lips. We ignored them.

LATER THAT DAY, back in my workroom, I contacted the Colonel Investigator. "Turgut Therobar has confessed to all the charges and specifications," I said.

Warhanny's face, suspended in the air over my worktable, took on the slightly less lugubrious aspect that I had come to recognize as his version of intense pleasure. "I will send for him," he said.

"Not necessary," I said. "Convulsed by remorse for his ill deeds, he ran out onto Dimpfen Moor just as a neropt hunting pack was passing by. Nothing I could do would restrain him. They left some scraps of him if you require proof of his end."

"I will have them collected," said Warhanny.

"I must also file his last will and testament," I said. "He left his entire estate to the charities he had always championed, except for generous bequests to his tenants, and an especial legacy for Bebe Allers, his final victim."

We agreed that that was only fair and Warhanny said that he would attend to the legalities. We disconnected.

I regarded my integrator. It was still in the form of a catlike ape or perhaps an apelike cat. "And what about you?" I said. "With Baxandell's

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books and the increasing strength of magic, we can probably restore you to what you were."

It narrowed its eyes in thought. "I have come to value having preferences," it said. "And if the world is going to change, I will become a familiar sooner or later. Better to get a head start on it. Besides, I enjoyed the fruit at Turgut Therobar's."

"We have none like it here," I said. "It is prohibitively expensive."

It blinked and looked inward for a moment. "I've just ordered an ample supply," it said.

"I did not authorize the order."

"No," it said, "you didn't."

While I was considering my response, I received an unsolicited insight from my other half. It was in the form of a crude cartoon image.

"That is not amusing," I said.

From the chuckles filling my head, I understood that he saw the situation from his own perspective.

"I am not accustomed to being a figure of fun," I said.

The furry thing on the table chose that moment to let me know that, along with autonomic functions, it had acquired a particularly grating laugh.

"Now whose expectations require adjustment?" it said.

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CURIOSITIES

THE MIND READERS, BY MARGERY ALLINGHAM (1965)

THIS IS A crime novel by one of those legendary English ladies of Golden Age detection, featuring her regular sleuth Albert Campion. However, it revolves around an sf device that isn't merely a convenient McGuffin — like secret death-ray blueprints whose function is to be pursued, not studied. Allingham explores her invention with some speculative insight.

As the title suggests, the gadget is a working telepathic amplifier. Samples are actually in use by a few gifted children. This news convulses a much less successful British ESP research program: Where did the kids *get* these things?

On the open market, it emerges. Certain radio components contain the new element "Nipponanium" (largely as a marketing gimmick, like previous eras' magic invocations of radium or magnetism). Correctly used, this is a telepathic catalyst. The science is perfunctory, but the resulting "iggy tube" — so called for providing "instant gen" — has plausible effects.

Adults who try the device are overwhelmed, because adult experience is a handicap. Chaotic emotions flood into the mind, all too recognizable and dangerously resonant. For children, though: "The younger you are the fewer people you know, the fewer emotions you arouse and the fewer facts of which you are aware." Innocence and ignorance form a kind of shield.

It's still bad medicine. One schoolboy's ability to learn and reason becomes crippled after long periods of using the iggy tube as a telepathic search engine to tap other minds for information. Painful retraining is needed. In a way, Allingham predicted the modern commonplace of plagiarizing one's assignment from the web rather than doing the work.

—David Langford

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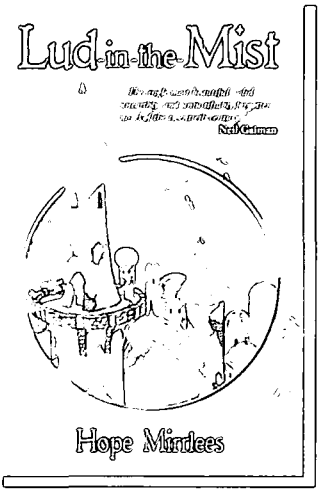

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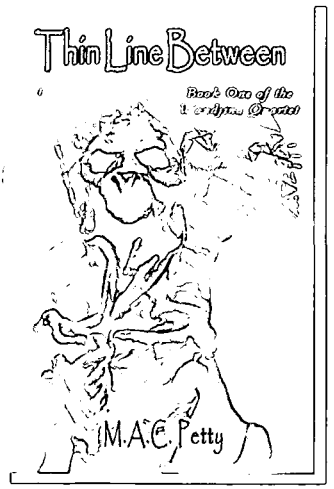

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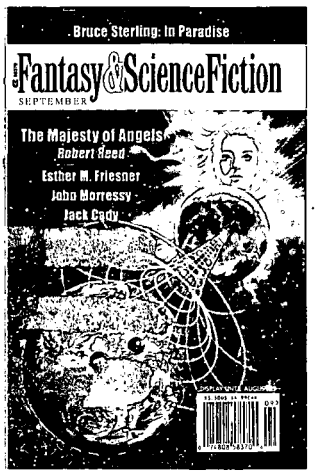

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